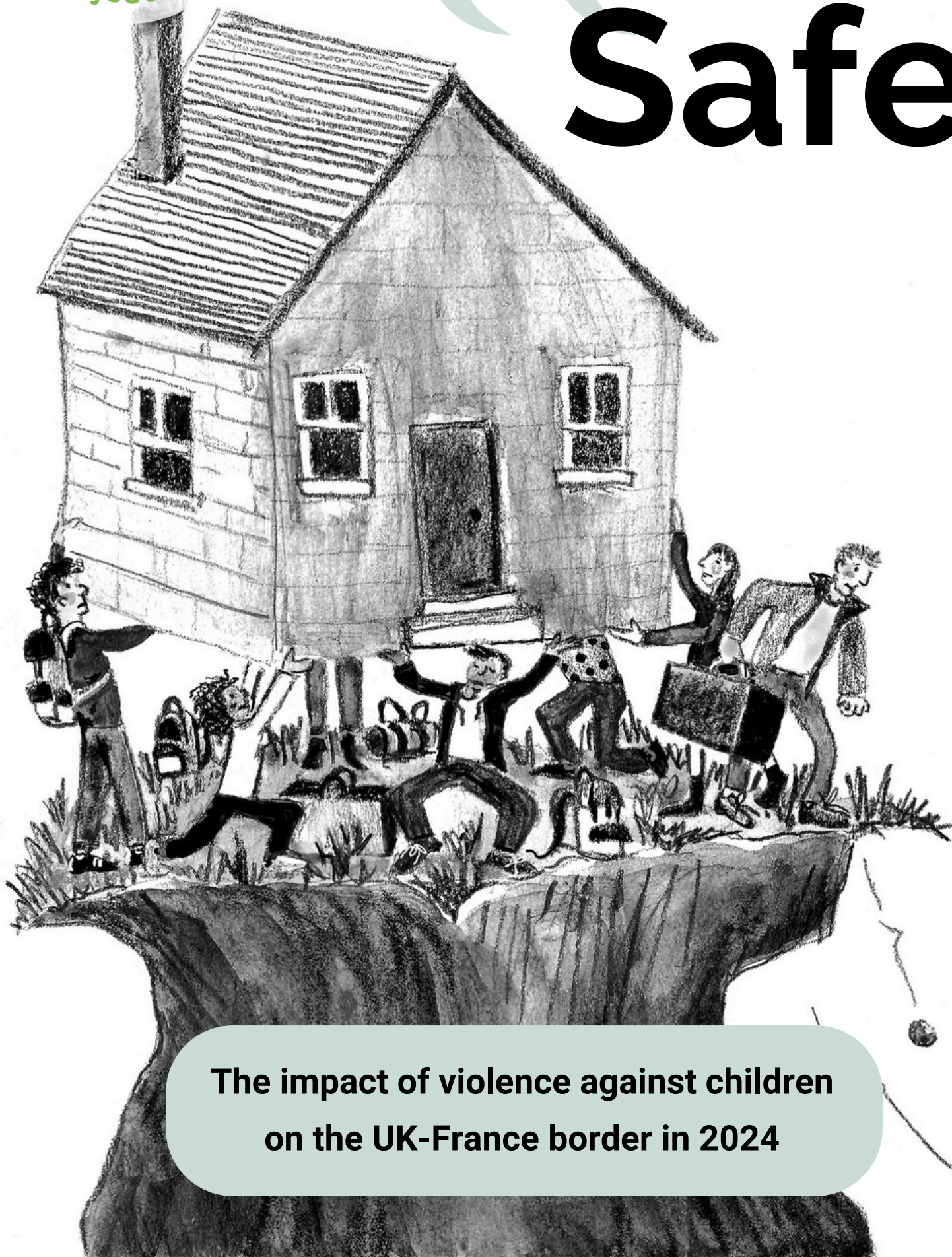




We Want to be  
**Safe.**



**The impact of violence against children  
on the UK-France border in 2024**



**No one puts their children in a boat  
unless the water is safer than the land.**

*- "Home", Warsan Shire*



# For the Children Killed on the UK-France Border.

This report is dedicated to the children killed on the UK-France border. Each child was so much more than a number - they were all children, who played and laughed and cried. Each had a future ahead of them. Each deserved to live in safety and happiness.

Today, and every day, we remember them. We remember those whose names we know, and those whose names we don't. We remember:

## **Abadeh, 14**

Abadeh and his older brother, Aysar, left their home in Deraa, Syria, in May 2023 in the hope of joining their brother who lived in the UK. Abadeh was a football fan, and loved to play. Both Abadeh and Aysar, 26, were killed on during a crossing attempt on the 14th January 2024.

## **Mohamed, 16**

Mohamed was 16, from Deraa in Syria. He had been living with his family in Libya during the Syrian war. He was killed during a crossing attempt on the 14th January 2024.

## **Roula, 7**

Roula was born in Iraq in 2016, the little sister to three older brothers. She was travelling with her mother, father and brothers, who said she was the best in her class in school. Her mother was pregnant when Roula was killed during a crossing attempt on the 3rd March 2024.

## **Sara, 7**

Sara was travelling with her mother, father and older sister and brother. Sara and her siblings had been born in Europe after her parents fled Iraq in 2010. Sara was killed during a crossing attempt on the 23rd April 2024.

## **Abdelaziz, 15**

Abdelaziz was 15 and from Sudan. He was killed during a crossing attempt on the 19<sup>th</sup> July 2024.





**Mohammed, 10 months**

Mohammed was 10 months old, from Libya, travelling with his family. He died in Calais as a result of health problems on the 29th July 2024.

**Ishannullah, 16**

Ishannullah was 16 and from Afghanistan. He was killed during a crossing attempt on the 11th August 2024.

**Sabila, 15**

Sabila was from Eritrea, travelling alone. She was killed during a crossing attempt on the 3rd September 2024.

**Five unknown children killed in one shipwreck on the 3rd September 2024.**

We do not know the names or ages of these children. We believe they were from Eritrea.

**Meri, three days**

Meri was delivered when her mother had to undergo an emergency Caesarean after being involved in the shipwreck on the 3rd September 2024. Whilst her mother survived, Meri died in hospital at three days old.

**Mansur, 2**

Mansur, from Somalia, was travelling with his mother. He died in her arms during a crossing attempt on the 5th October 2024.

**Maryam, 4 months**

Maryam was born to a family from Iraqi Kurdistan, during their journey across Europe. She had two older siblings. She was killed during a crossing attempt on the 17th October 2024.

**Salah, 16**

Salah was from Somalia. He was killed during a crossing attempt on the 30th October 2024.

**We remember each of these children, killed in 2024, and every child killed on the UK-France border in the years before.**





In memory of all those who have lost their lives at borders.

---

**In solidarity** with all those still risking theirs, the friends and families who grieve loved ones, and the survivors who deserved better.

**In hope** of a fairer world - in which safety is not a privilege for some, but a right for all.



2024 saw a **sharp increase in instances of police violence against children and a devastating rise in child fatalities on the UK-France border**. More children were killed in the last year than in the previous four years combined.

This report **embeds the voices of children throughout** to **examine the impacts** of these events on children, and to **recommend solutions** to ensure children's rights are respected, protected and fulfilled.

Project Play is an association which has been facilitating play sessions for children on the move in northern France since 2018. Working in informal living sites, safe houses and community centres, we meet children aged 0-18 and their families. Since 2018, we have worked with 7,735 children. We are the only organisation working specifically with children of all ages in this context.

Project Play's work focuses on children, and this report reflects that. This focus does not seek to diminish or undermine the experiences of adult men and women living on the UK-France border. All people have the right to life, to be free from inhuman and degrading treatment, and to live in dignity. We support the work of our partner organisations to advance access to rights for other demographics of people on the move living on the UK-France border.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

**Authors:** Lily MacTaggart and Katie Hall, with Kate O'Neill

**Illustration:** Niamh Shaw

We thank in particular the children who shared their stories with us. Their contributions are anonymised and their names have been changed to protect their identities.

This report was a collaborative effort. Whilst Project Play encounters unaccompanied children, we do not provide specialised services for them. We thank Utopia 56, Medecins Sans Frontieres, ECPAT France and La Croix Rouge, whose contributions enabled us to explore the situation for all children on the border, even those who Project Play rarely encounters.

We thank the following partners for their support: Human Rights Observers, Secours Catholique Calais, Humans for Rights Network, Calais Migrant Solidarity, Alarmphone and Safe Passage.

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## Methodology

Project Play observed an increase in violence at the border in 2024 whilst carrying out our service. This report centres on our own qualitative and quantitative data, collected by our team of volunteers and staff on the ground. After each Project Play session, a detailed debrief is written by the team, which collects quantitative data such as the number of children seen and the amount of hours played, alongside qualitative data including testimonies from children and families as well as our team's observations.

We also reached out to partner organisations in northern France and the UK, and were fortunate to be able to use a range of raw data and reports collected and collated by them.



## List of Figures

**Figure 1:** UK Spending on Securitisation vs Average Number of People per Boat. **p.38**

**Figure 2:** Mapping Interceptions and Fatal Incidents with Children's Emotional Wellbeing and Reports of Violence **p.48**

## Note on Language

Language has the power to divide and dehumanise. In this report, we choose language which challenges narratives of division and dehumanisation. For further detail, see [Appendix A: The Power of Language](#).

## List of Terms

### **Asylum seeker**

Someone who has registered an asylum claim in a country outside their home country.

### **Crossing (attempt)**

Unless otherwise stated, this refers to attempts to irregularly cross the Channel in small boats.

### **Global North**

Countries in Europe, North America, Oceania and Asia which have benefited economically from colonisation and globalization. Many of these countries were colonial powers in the 16th-20th centuries, and still wield disproportionate power on the global stage.

### **Global South**

Countries in Africa, Asia, Oceania, Latin America and the Caribbean which have been underdeveloped as a result of colonisation and globalization. Many of these countries were colonised by the Global North in the 16th-20th centuries and have since been part of decolonisation movements and alliances.

### **Informal living sites**

Living sites which are not approved by government or local authorities and which are therefore precarious and materially vulnerable. Tents or abandoned buildings may offer a crude form of shelter in informal living sites.

### **Intermediaries**

People who organise irregular crossings across borders (often referred to as 'smugglers').

### **Irregular migration**

Migration which takes place outside of state-sanctioned systems of crossing borders.

### **People on the move/children on the move**

People or children who are currently undertaking a migration journey. This includes people hoping to cross the English Channel to reach the UK.

### **Refugee**

Someone who has been granted refugee status.



### **Safe routes**

Processes which allow people to safely travel from one country to another, particularly from a place where they are at risk to a safer country.

### **Unaccompanied children**

Children (anybody under the age of 18) who are travelling without a parent or adult carer.

### **United Nations Refugee Convention (“The 1951 Refugee Convention”)**

The United Nations convention which defines refugees and outlines how they should be treated. It also details the rights of asylum seekers.

### **United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)**

An international treaty ratified in 1989 by the majority of UN members including the UK and France which lays out the fundamental rights of all children.



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



This report has been compiled by Project Play in response to the sharp increase in instances of police violence against children and devastating rise in child fatalities in 2024. More children were killed on the UK-France border last year than in the previous four years combined. In examining the impacts of this increased violence and fatalities on children, this report embeds the voices of children throughout, through the stories and testimonies they gave to Project Play's team.

**“[The police] bring out the knives and pepper spray then guns. I was like... I’m only a child. Why are you doing this?... we want to be safe and that’s it.”**

*- Miel\*, 15, and Y\*, 13, from Iraqi Kurdistan, who attended Project Play sessions in 2024*

This analysis locates children's experiences of violence in a policy landscape which has grown ever more hostile. Examining policy shifts, our own data and evidence provided to us by collaborating partners, we argue that political choices on both sides of the Channel have a direct and devastating impact on the human rights of children on the border, endangering their well-being and survival. This is reflected in no small part by the deaths of at least 15 children on the border in 2024.

**“Did you know that there’s lots of Kurdish people buried here who died in a boat? I don’t want to die on a boat.”**

*- J\*, 8, speaking to our team at a funeral for a baby killed during a crossing attempt.*

**Section 1 (Context)** explores the situation on the UK-France border, contextualised globally and situated in a European policy landscape which fails to ensure that those seeking safety can access it. While many who make the journey across the UK-France border go on to claim asylum, they first endure violent living conditions and deadly border crossings.

In 2024, 4,794 children made an irregular journey across the Channel. Since 2018, children have represented nearly one in five of those arriving in the UK via such routes, including many who travel unaccompanied. Despite the obligations of France and the UK under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), their focus on deterrent policies contravenes children's human rights - threatening children's wellbeing and, ultimately, their survival.



**Section 2 (2024 - Deadly by Design)** explores how policies pursued by the UK and France render the border an increasingly dangerous space for children. Despite record child fatalities in 2024 neither government keeps an official record of these deaths, prioritising violence and dehumanisation over dignity and human rights. This reflects broader European trends of deterrence, leaving children and families few alternatives but to risk their lives to reach safety.

Policy decisions on both sides of the Channel place children at risk of harm. Unaccompanied children are at disproportionate risk, for example, facing criminalisation as boat ‘captains’ and detention in adult prisons. Bilateral agreements have invested taxpayer money into border securitisation, funding harmful intelligence operations and violent police interventions. Under the guise of improving safety, these efforts have directly increased the risk of children experiencing violence, serious injury and death.

---

**Section 3 (Violence in Living Sites)** highlights how children living in informal sites in northern France face regular and violent police evictions, causing both physical and psychological harm. In 2024, half of Project Play’s sessions in Calais were disrupted by such operations. Unaccompanied minors were particularly vulnerable, frequently treated as adults and exposed to tear gas, rubber bullets and police violence. Constant police presence and surveillance heightened children’s anxiety and distress, often expressed through their play and behaviour.

Beyond the violence of evictions, the living conditions facing children on the move pose serious risks to their wellbeing. The French government’s failure to provide basic services leaves children, especially those with health conditions or disabilities, in situations of extreme vulnerability. In one case, a 10-month-old baby, Mohammed, died from health complications whilst unable to access care. These conditions compound the harms children experience daily and comprise structural violence in themselves.

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**Section 4 (The Violence of Crossing Attempts)** examines the impact of irregular Channel crossings on children. These journeys are inherently dangerous, but intensified policing made them even more life-threatening in 2024, particularly for those travelling by small boat. Children faced risks of injury and death due to overcrowded vessels, crush injuries and police tactics, including the interception and destruction of boats. At least three children died from crush injuries in 2024.

Police use of tear gas and the stabbing of boats on beaches was frequent, further endangering children. Attempts to avoid such violence pushed families toward more remote and hazardous routes. 7-year-old Roula was killed in a canal 30 km from the coast in one such attempt. With safe routes to asylum largely inaccessible, many relied on intermediaries, who often posed additional risks. This was particularly true for unaccompanied children.

Children also suffered serious psychological harm from the trauma of repeated crossing attempts and constant police presence. Many expressed fear of the water, police and separation from family - fears evident in their behaviour and play. Authorities on both sides of the Channel failed to provide support or care following traumatic events, compounding harm. Families who lost children were often met with criminalisation rather than compassion - deepening the emotional toll of already devastating experiences.



**Section 5 (Creating Change on the UK-France Border)** concludes, summarising findings and recommendations. It is argued that **current policies governing the UK-France border are failing to respect and protect children's rights - instead exposing them to multiple sources of violence, compounding their experiences of trauma, and heightening their risk of death.**

An end to the violence facing children on the border and the prevention of future fatalities requires urgent, short-term and long-term policy change. Our recommendations:

## URGENT

**To prevent further loss of life, the governments of the UK and France should urgently:**

- **Demonstrate cross-border accountability for incidents and fatalities in the Channel:**
  - Commit to life-saving operations, genuinely prioritising human life over surveillance.
  - Publish data on deaths in the Channel.
  - Improve support offered to shipwreck and failed crossing survivors.
- **End the criminalisation of people on the move:**
  - Reverse damaging legislation which criminalises those arriving irregularly, including small boat 'captains', who are often unaccompanied children.

## SHORT-TERM

**To end systemic violence against people on the move, including children, and the erosion of respect for human rights on the border, the governments of the UK and France must:**

- **Put an end to state violence on the border:**
  - France must end evictions, interceptions and all forms of violence, reversing the 'Zero Point of Fixation' policy.
  - The UK must end the funding which enables such violence
- **Ensure safe and accessible routes to asylum are available for all those who need them:**
  - The UK government must create genuinely accessible safe routes to asylum in the UK.
  - The French government must create adapted asylum services in Calais and Dunkirk and improve information provision for those wishing to claim asylum in France.

## LONG-TERM

**Creating enduring change requires a shift from policies rooted in hostility to those which prioritise human rights. To achieve this, we urge the UK and France to:**

- **Create genuine policies of welcome**, prioritising the dignity and human rights of people seeking safety in France and the UK.
- **Become European leaders** in championing human rights and ending hostility to migration, supporting collective change on a regional level.

## Section 1:

# INTRODUCTION



Moving to escape danger, threat or severe hardship is an inherent part of human nature. Since the early 1990s, northern France has been a bottleneck for people on the move, including children and families.<sup>1</sup> For these people, this space is one of systematic violence. The policies governing immigration and asylum in France, the UK and across Europe are defined by hostility - particularly when focused on people of colour and people from the Global South.<sup>2</sup>

The vast majority of people on the move who make the journey across the UK-France border go on to claim asylum, seeking safety from persecution or a well founded fear of persecution in their home countries.<sup>3</sup> The right to seek asylum recognises the importance of being able to access safety in times of need, and the 1951 Refugee Convention protects this in law.<sup>4</sup> The States Parties to the Refugee Convention, including the UK and France, have a duty to uphold the rights of individuals to seek asylum. This means they must not only avoid obstructing access to asylum procedures, but must also take active steps to ensure these procedures are fair, effective and accessible to those who need them.<sup>5</sup> For children, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child reinforces and expands these obligations.<sup>6</sup>

**Yet, despite these obligations, meaningful access to asylum remains out of reach for so many of those who need it, including children and families.**

This has been compounded by growing border securitisation - the process of heightened surveillance, violent policing and intelligence gathering in border spaces. Increasing violence and the persistent failure to provide essential services leave people trapped in limbo for long periods of time, and with no other choice but to embark on dangerous journeys - including crossing one of the busiest shipping lanes in the world in small, unseaworthy boats. Every day hundreds of people, many of them children, are forced to endure precarious living conditions as they wait to attempt these deadly crossings.

Whilst this is not a new phenomenon, 2024 marked the deadliest recorded year for people on the move on the UK-France border.<sup>7</sup> Increasingly restrictive access to safe routes and growing securitisation forces people into ever more dangerous and traumatic journeys, often ending in enduring harm, injury and death.

In 2024, Project Play observed a significantly higher number of reports about violence against and witnessed by children and families compared to previous years. In their quantity and content, the stories children have told us attest to the intensification of violence both in living sites and during crossing attempts. Children have spoken of choking on water after the

police stabbed the boats they were attempting to board, and of being in clouds of tear gas which hurt their eyes. Children have told us of being on boats where people have died, and parents have spoken to us of their worry for their children after such events.

The physical and psychological impact of these experiences are profound. We have worked with children who have been physically injured, including a two-month-old with eye damage from tear gas, and children with injuries to their limbs and faces, explained to us only as having happened during crossing. On every session we facilitated, we worked with children in emotional distress, children playing out traumatic experiences or engaging in violent, aggressive play, and children struggling with exhaustion.

These experiences are not isolated incidents, but part of a broader pattern observed by many organisations: on the UK-France border state violence is escalating, and preventable deaths are increasing. This report brings together our observations with those of our partner organisations to document this intensification, particularly through the stories of the children we work with. It is a response to the urgent need to understand what is happening, and take action to end this violence.

## 1.1. CONTEXT - THE UK-FRANCE BORDER

### 1.1.a. Why are there people on the move in northern France?

The vast majority of those who are forcibly displaced remain in their home countries, with only 41% seeking asylum elsewhere. Even fewer, 13%, travel beyond a neighbouring country, and fewer still travel to Europe or countries in the Global North.<sup>8</sup>

People on the move in northern France are of diverse nationalities, but in the past two decades most have come from countries in the Global South. In 2024, people from Afghanistan, Syria, Iran, Vietnam and Eritrea represented nearly two-thirds of all small boat arrivals to the UK.<sup>9</sup> The majority of the top 10 nationalities are from countries that were directly influenced by British colonialism.<sup>10</sup>

The reasons for moving, and for seeking to reach the UK in particular, are as varied as the number of people who make the journey. Conflict or political unrest, severe economic hardship, and climate breakdown are just a few reasons for which people are forced to leave their homes. For the minority of forcibly displaced people who leave their home countries, linguistic, familial, community or cultural links are common factors influencing where they hope to move to.<sup>11</sup>

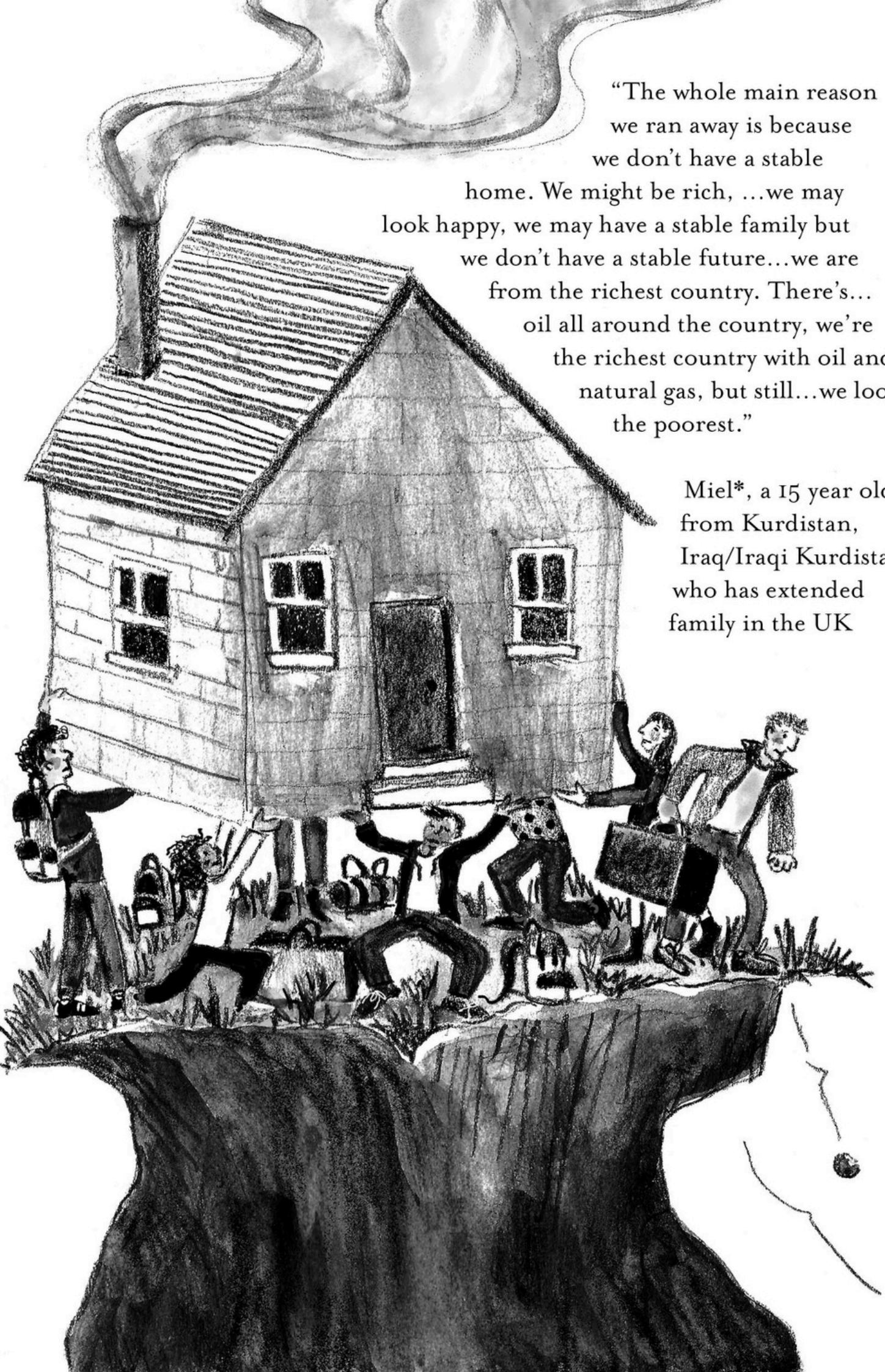
The situation in northern France is part of a larger pattern of border violence around the world, rooted in patterns of global injustice (for more on this, see our [Afterword](#)).

As a result, people's journeys to find safety are often long, challenging and complex.



“The whole main reason we ran away is because we don't have a stable home. We might be rich, ...we may look happy, we may have a stable family but we don't have a stable future...we are from the richest country. There's... oil all around the country, we're the richest country with oil and natural gas, but still...we look the poorest.”

Miel\*, a 15 year old from Kurdistan, Iraq/Iraqi Kurdistan who has extended family in the UK



### 1.1.b. Violence and Forced Instability: Life on the Move in northern France

Whilst northern France has never been the site of permanent ‘refugee camps’ like those found in Greece, 2015 and 2016 saw the emergence of larger and more consistent living sites. However, since the destruction of these sites, notably the Calais “Jungle” in 2016 and La Linière in Dunkirk in 2017, people on the move predominantly live in smaller, informal living sites.<sup>12</sup> Although some state accommodation is available, in reality there is nowhere near enough to meet demand. Furthermore, it is often inadequate and difficult to access, leaving most people to live in tents in transient living sites all year round.<sup>13</sup>

**In April 2024, we overheard an 11-year-old ask a 7-year-old if they wanted to take a picture they had drawn home. The 7-year-old replied, “I don’t have a home”.**

In these sites, access to rubbish collection, food, water, and hygiene services is limited or non-existent, with NGOs attempting to fill the gaps left by the state. In 2018 United Nations human rights experts reported on “the inhumane and substandard conditions” of these sites, urging France to expand efforts to provide sanitation, safe drinking water and shelter for people on the move.<sup>14</sup> In 2023, multiple recommendations were made to France as part of the 54th Universal Periodic Review, coordinated by UNHCR, illustrating little substantive change to realise the rights of people on the move in the region.<sup>15</sup>

These living conditions are worsened by policies aimed at creating instability and impermanence, which in practice are a source of physical and psychological violence against people on the move. French authorities regularly evict people from informal sites. During evictions, anyone within the site is forced to move outside a given perimeter by police, and any belongings left inside the site are confiscated.<sup>16</sup>

These evictions are actioned as part of a policy of “Zero points of fixation”, which aims to prevent the establishment of permanent settlements.<sup>17</sup> This policy, which is funded and agreed upon by the UK government, is part of an intentional pattern of increasing securitisation on the border, alongside greater police presence and the expansion of surveillance infrastructure.<sup>18</sup> This trajectory is sculpted through both increasingly hardline domestic policies in both the UK and France, as well as a two-decade long bilateral agreement between both nations aimed at securitisation.<sup>19</sup>


Simultaneously, the erosion of safe routes to accessing asylum, in the UK and France, leaves people with no viable alternative than to endure increasingly hostile living conditions and embark on increasingly dangerous journeys.<sup>20</sup>





Indeed, significant investment in security measures aimed at preventing border crossings in lorries and trains, the main means of crossing pre-2020, has been a key factor in the shift to small boat crossings.<sup>21</sup> These crossings may have enabled people to avoid expansions in surveillance, but they carry far greater risks due to weather conditions, exposure and the perils of crossing one of the world's busiest shipping lanes in wholly unsuitable vessels.

Furthermore, some people - particularly unaccompanied children - still cross in lorries and containers, particularly those who cannot afford to pay an intermediary to organise a small boat crossing for them. These journeys also carry high levels of risk, both on roads trying to enter lorries and once inside.<sup>22</sup> In 2024, MSF found that most Sudanese unaccompanied children attempt to cross by lorry, for example, due to being the least likely to have the financial resources to pay for crossing.<sup>23</sup>



Of those who crossed the Channel between 2018 and 2024, almost **one in five** were children.

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### 1.1.c. Children on the Border

Of those who crossed the Channel between 2018 and 2024, almost one in five were children.<sup>24</sup> In the same period, Project Play encountered 7,242 children across sites in Calais and Grande-Synthe; 1,124 in 2024 alone. These children were aged between 0 and 18, with an average age of 7.7 years. Whilst the majority of children we work with are accompanied by their families or caregivers, there are a large number of children travelling unaccompanied. The French Red Cross reported meeting 879 unaccompanied children in Dunkirk and Grand-Synthe in 2024.

These numbers only account for those in contact with organisations, and as such they are likely an underestimate. Many more children remain unaccounted for, navigating the border in isolation.

Whilst living in limbo in northern France, children are denied access to many of their fundamental rights, including the right to shelter, adequate sanitation, and protection from



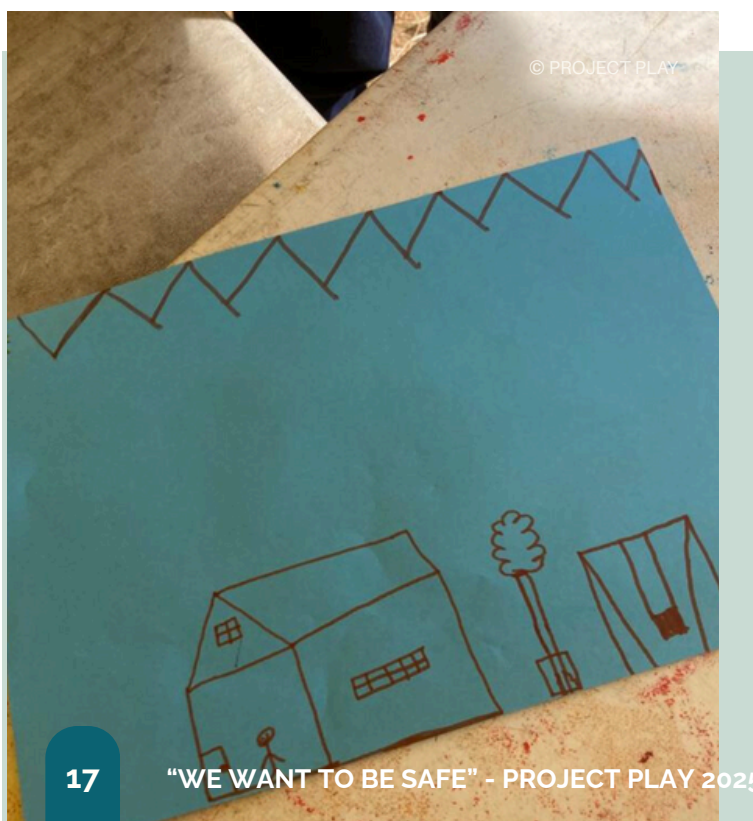
violence. As a result of inadequate accommodation provision, many children are forced to live in makeshift camps, often in tents, exposed to the elements and the constant threat of eviction.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) enshrines for all children, regardless of nationality or legal status, fundamental rights. These include the right to life, to be protected from violence and to access healthcare, amongst others. These rights apply equally at borders and in transit - the fact that children are in situations of movement does not exempt governments from their responsibilities. Indeed, the specific vulnerabilities of children on the move entitles them to additional protections under the UNCRC.<sup>25</sup> As a result, both France and the UK have the obligation to ensure that children seeking refuge have their rights respected, and receive appropriate protection and assistance.

**Yet, the experiences of children on the move in northern France illustrate that, far from accessing protection, they are subject to systemic violence and myriad rights abuses.**

In 2019, the European Court of Human Rights heard a case brought by an unaccompanied child who was twelve when he spent several months on the border in Calais (Khan vs France). The Court found that the lack of state protection and the living conditions endured constituted inhuman and degrading treatment.<sup>26</sup> A 2024 report, compiled in the wake of this judgment by organisations supporting unaccompanied children, illustrated continued failures to protect unaccompanied children and ongoing abuses of their fundamental rights by the state.<sup>27</sup>

Whilst the French authorities are predominantly responsible for enacting the policies which create this climate of violence and rights repression, the UK government is responsible both for shaping and funding them. This reflects a systemic and cross-border failure to protect children in situations of displacement on the UK-France border. The increase in child fatalities and the use of violence against children in 2024 demonstrates that this situation is worsening.



**“An 11-year-old told us they’d been travelling for a long time, and that they wanted to find a house to live in. They said they liked minecraft, and when I asked why, they said ‘because you can build a home’”**

*- Katie Hall, Advocacy Lead, Project Play*

## Section 2:

# 2024 - DEADLY BY DESIGN



**The UK-France border is defined by systemic violence and preventable death. Since 1999 until the time of writing, at least 503 people have been killed - among them, at least 50 were children.<sup>28</sup>**

This number doesn't include those who have gone missing or been lost at sea. These deaths have resulted from dangerous attempts to cross the Channel, inhumane and violent living conditions, vehicle incidents and mental health crises.<sup>29</sup> These are not tragic accidents - they are the consequence of deliberate political choices made by the UK and French governments. No-one should have to risk their life to seek safety.

The sharp rise in fatalities in 2024 cannot be explained by an increase in crossings. While the number of people crossing rose by 25% from 2023 to 2024, deaths increased by 242%.<sup>30</sup> For children, the picture is even more stark: despite a nearly 9% decrease in the number of children crossing, the number of children killed during crossing attempts rose from 1 to 15 - an increase 1,500%.<sup>31</sup>

This deeply disproportionate shift illustrates that the UK-France border is becoming increasingly deadly, and especially for children. This is underscored by intersecting factors, key to which are the erosion of safe routes, the criminalisation of people on the move, and the expansion of violent policies and practices.

### NOTE ON STATISTICS

Compiling an accurate record of those who are killed or go missing in their journeys across borders is challenging. Neither France nor the UK publish official data on those killed or lost during crossing attempts - a trend seen across Europe's borders.<sup>32</sup> Non-governmental organisations work to fill this gap, but often rely on reports made by local authorities, the media and other grassroots organisations.

Many people making these journeys fear interception by the authorities, and thus their crossings may go undetected, especially in instances of failure, and families may lack the resources or information to report people going missing. This, combined with inconsistent media reporting, means that the number of those who are killed or go missing on our borders is likely an undercount.<sup>33</sup>

Nonetheless, the data collected by NGOs is crucial to beginning to understand the stories of those risking their lives to seek safety.

The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) collates data from press releases, media reports and local organisations as part of their Missing Migrants Project.<sup>34</sup> On the UK-France border, Calais Migrant Solidarity works to compile statistics as do other organisations, such as the media outlet Les Jours.<sup>35</sup>

#### URGENT POLICY RECOMMENDATION:



**The UK and France should demonstrate accountability for incidents and fatalities in the Channel, including the publication of data on those killed in crossing attempts.**

## 2.1. THE EROSION OF SAFE AND ACCESSIBLE ROUTES TO ASYLUM

The systematic restriction of safe access to asylum leaves children and families in prolonged limbo on the UK-France border, facing no alternative than to make the life-threatening journey across the Channel.

**In 2024, we worked with a mother whose child had been killed during a crossing attempt. She told us that they had to keep trying to reach the UK - that crossing the Channel was the only way she could secure a safe future for her other children.**

This demonstrates the unthinkable choice people on the UK-France border are faced with making and exemplifies that, without the creation of safe alternatives, Channel crossings will continue. Policies seeking to deter them will serve only to make them more dangerous.

'Safe routes' refer to formally recognised pathways which enable people to reach protection without resorting to dangerous journeys. The restriction of such routes in both the UK and France has a direct impact on the children we work with, and illustrates a failing on both sides of the Channel. Whilst the UK government fails to ensure safe, accessible and effective routes to asylum for all those who need them, the French government fails to provide meaningful access to asylum support and services in France. This exacerbates the bottleneck created in northern France.

The situation on the UK-France border is further compounded by policies of hostility across Europe, preventing people from accessing the safety they need. As long as people cannot access asylum, in the UK, France or elsewhere, Channel crossings will continue and lives will continue to be lost.



### 2.1.a. In the UK

The UK government has steadily dismantled safe routes to asylum. Between 2019 and 2022, access to resettlement dropped by 75%, and family reunification visas by 40%.<sup>36</sup> As of 2024, viable routes exist almost exclusively for people from Ukraine and Hong Kong - narrow categories of eligibility which exclude the vast majority of people in need of protection.<sup>37</sup>

For children, and especially unaccompanied children, recent policy changes have further shrunk their already limited options for safe entry, notably the end of the European Union's Dublin III arrangements and the cessation of the Dubs Scheme.<sup>38</sup> Children who become separated from family or attempt to reunite with relatives in the UK are especially affected. Project Play has also observed the impact of anxiety around family separation amongst children. Even for those who do qualify, meaningful access to safe routes in practice is frequently restricted due to complex, opaque bureaucracy and long backlogs.<sup>39</sup>

**In early 2025, the UK's All-Party Parliamentary Group on Refugees not only concluded that "current safe...routes are inaccessible and inadequate", but that this is driving dangerous journeys across the Channel.**<sup>40</sup>

That accessible safe routes directly reduce Channel crossings is clearly seen when contrasting recent statistics. After the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, over 150,000 people accessed specific protection schemes - and only two Ukrainians have crossed the Channel irregularly since.<sup>41</sup> Meanwhile, just 2,436 people used the much less accessible Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme by mid-2024, whilst over 16,000 Afghans made the Channel crossing between 2021 and 2023.<sup>42</sup>

With no safe routes accessible to so many people who need them, irregular crossings are the only option remaining. As security has increased surrounding lorry crossings and at the Eurotunnel, paying an intermediary to organise a boat crossing has become the only viable option for most people.<sup>43</sup> However, these intermediaries often cause harm to individuals in various ways, including charging large amounts of money for crossing attempts.<sup>44</sup>

In March 2024, a 13-year-old and their mother were very distressed following a failed attempt to cross. They explained that they had been left behind as they didn't have enough money to pay the intermediaries. Seeking asylum is a fundamental human right, and one that should not be restricted by lack of money. Yet, the UK's refusal to create safe and accessible routes means access to asylum is often restricted to those with the financial resources to pay intermediaries.

Where safe routes exist and are accessible, people use them. Where they do not, people are forced to risk their lives. For thousands of people each year, the only route to safety remains the dangerous and often deadly Channel crossing. These journeys are not the result of choice - they are the result of policy.

#### SHORT-TERM POLICY RECOMMENDATION:



**The UK government must create genuinely accessible and adapted safe routes to seeking asylum in the UK, for all those who need them.**



### 2.1.b. In France

Northern France has become a bottleneck for those seeking safety, and not only those hoping to reach the UK.

**A number of families we worked with in 2024, including one whose child had been killed during a crossing attempt, felt they could not claim asylum in France as they believed they would be rejected.**

The French government has done little to ensure access to information on the French asylum process for those in northern France, nor to adapt asylum services to those in Calais, Dunkirk and the surrounding areas. Usually in France, asylum seekers must submit their claims to the regional

prefecture within 3-10 days after expressing their wish to claim asylum.<sup>45</sup> However, many organisations who support people on the move, including Secours Catholique, told us that this system is not sufficiently adapted to meet the needs of the situation in Calais, for several reasons:

Firstly, the information available to those in northern France is ill-adapted to potential asylum seekers, since many of those present have not spent much time in France and have not necessarily arrived with the intention of remaining.

**UN research in Calais carried out in 2024 found that 8% of those interviewed did not know how to apply for asylum in France.<sup>46</sup> Simultaneously, it highlighted that many people in northern France would be likely to qualify for asylum in France - yet many do not know how, or do not think it is a viable option.<sup>47</sup>**

This is compounded by practical barriers to accessing asylum proceedings in France. In 2016, people became unable to claim asylum in Calais directly - having instead to travel over 100 km to Lille.<sup>48</sup> Travel to Lille is difficult due to high police presence at train stations, with Human Rights Observers documenting regular police harassment, stop and search and ID checks at train stations in Calais.<sup>49</sup> This renders initial access to asylum and attendance at subsequent appointments challenging and frightening for those living at the border.

These factors create significant barriers to accessing asylum for people on the move in northern France. To address this, the French government should reintroduce the possibility of registering asylum claims directly in Calais and ensure that clear, accessible information about the asylum process is widely available in Calais, Dunkirk, and surrounding areas.

#### SHORT-TERM POLICY RECOMMENDATION:



**The French government must create adapted asylum services in Calais and Dunkirk and improve information provision for those wishing to claim asylum in France.**

## 2.1.c. In Europe

In 2024, we met high numbers of people who have spent time in other EU countries, including families whose children have been born there, ending up in northern France after their temporary protection status expired or their asylum claims were rejected. Often, this came after families had been in a country for extended periods of time, settling down and starting to create lives for them and their children.



**In 2024, on average two families a month told us they had been living in Germany previously.** In the majority of these cases, members of the family spoke a high level of German, **suggesting long stays in the country.**

In May 2024, the father of a 9-month-old described how his baby was born in Germany, where the family had lived for 3 years. They had to leave after being threatened with deportation to Iraq.

In August 2024, the father of a 6- and a 3-year-old spoke of their life in Germany, where he'd worked and the children had been in school, and said they were being forced to move again as their protection status hadn't been renewed.

**Children often discussed friends and schools they'd left behind** in Germany, **expressing sadness** that their **education and lives had been interrupted.**

In May 2024, one 12-year-old described how sad they were to have to leave all of their things behind in Germany.

In October 2024, a 12-year-old boy made a friendship bracelet in a Project Play session. It was for his best friend who he had had to leave behind in Germany.

**Germany wasn't the only European country which people had lived in** for large amounts of time **before coming to Calais.**

In June 2024, we worked with a child who told us they'd lived in Sweden for 10 years.

In October 2024, the mother of a 7-year-old girl told us her daughter was born prematurely in Libya after the mother suffered severe injuries, having travelled there on her journey to Europe from East Africa.<sup>50</sup> The family moved to Sweden and lived there for 6 years, but then had their papers removed. She described the changes she had seen in her daughter since leaving Sweden, including loss of appetite, being unhappy and missing her Swedish friends and school.

In research conducted by the UN in Calais in 2024, nearly **one in four** people interviewed had sought asylum in another EU country - illustrating that, for many, journeys to safety are long and complex.<sup>51</sup>



**Indeed, in May 2024, the mother of a 6-year-old and a 4-year-old said her youngest child was born in Calais and they didn't wish to try to cross with a baby, so had moved to Germany. However, they subsequently had to leave Germany and now, 4 years later, were back in Calais - once again trying to cross.**

Unable to find safety and stability for themselves and their families, people can be left feeling that the only option left to them is the UK, despite the dangerous journey to reach its shores.

**Ahmed Alhashimi explained this feeling following the death of his daughter Sara, who died at the border aged 7, telling the BBC: "If I knew there was a 1% chance that I could keep the kids in Belgium or France or Sweden or Finland I would keep them there".<sup>52</sup>**

It is not just as a result of UK and French policies that people on the move end up in northern France, hoping the UK might finally offer some safety and stability. Across Europe, governments are pursuing increasingly anti-migrant politics, tightening borders and narrowing access to asylum - with people on the move, including children, paying the price.<sup>53</sup> These domestic shifts are being cemented on a regional scale in the EU's revised Pact on Migration and Asylum, published in April 2024, which expands detention and allows for the more flexible use of violent and invasive "crisis" measures which diverge from EU law.<sup>54</sup>

This risks incentivising countries to pursue hostility, engendering a collective race to the bottom, where human rights protections are not harmonised, but hollowed out. Across Europe, these domestic and regional shifts are uprooting children and their families from the stability they had started to create, leaving them to face the violence that awaits them in northern France.

#### LONG-TERM POLICY RECOMMENDATION:



**The UK and France should work to become European leaders in championing human rights and ending hostility to migration, supporting collective change on a regional level.**

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## 2.2. CRIMINALISATION AND LEGISLATIVE VIOLENCE

Immigration and border control have long served as symbols of national sovereignty, deeply embedded in neo-colonial power structures following the decline of Empires in the twentieth century.<sup>55</sup> Recent years have seen not only the continuation but an intensification of hostile immigration policies, accompanied and enabled by increasingly dehumanising rhetoric. This is observable on both sides of the Channel, with profound implications for children on the move.

### 2.2.a. In the UK

In recent years, the UK has intensified the criminalisation of people on the move, including children. The 2022 Nationality and Borders Act limited protections for victims of trafficking, disproportionately impacting women and children. This Act also created the offence of 'illegal arrival', widening the scope of prosecutions for people crossing the Channel without permission.<sup>56</sup>

Not only does this measure undermine the right to seek asylum under the 1951 Refugee Convention, but it creates new risks for those arriving in small boats. Those who are accused of driving the boats (or, 'captains') can be charged with 'facilitating entry'. This fails to account for the myriad factors which may lead to someone steering a boat - previous experience driving, not having to pay for crossing, or coercion from intermediaries to do so, for example.<sup>57</sup>

Unaccompanied children are likely to lack financial resources to pay and can be vulnerable to coercion from intermediaries, meaning they often end up as 'captains'.

In the first year of the existence of this offence (June 2022-2023), 240 people were charged with 'illegal entry after arriving on small boats'.<sup>58</sup>

**Humans for Rights Network (HfRN) found that 15 age-disputed children were wrongly treated as adults and charged with offences related to 'illegal entry' and 'facilitation' of entry. Of these 15, 14 spent time in adult prisons.<sup>59</sup>**

This is very likely lower than the true figure of children, wrongly identified as adults, charged with and imprisoned for these offences. HfRN highlighted the serious psychological and physical harm experienced by children in adult courts and prisons.<sup>60</sup>



The detention of children in adult prisons is in direct breach of **Article 37 UNCRC**. Subjecting them to adult court proceedings also risks contravening **Article 40 UNCRC**, which protects children's right to a fair trial accounting for their age into account, and **contradicts domestic UK sentencing guidelines**.<sup>61</sup> It also represents a profound failure to support trauma-experienced children in their recovery and reintegration under **Article 39 UNCRC**.

**Nonetheless, many children are facing such circumstances as a result of the provisions created by the Nationality and Borders Act 2022.**

In March 2024, Ibrahima Bah was sentenced to nine years in prison following his crossing in which he was allegedly driving the boat when it sank, killing four people travelling with him. Ibrahima's birth certificate shows that he was only 17 at the time of sentencing, yet he was tried as an adult.<sup>62</sup> During his trial, Ibrahima explained that he could not afford to pay for a crossing, and as a result was offered to drive the boat in exchange for free passage. He also testified that he had been threatened by the intermediaries organising the crossing when he saw the boat and raised concerns that it was unsafe. Nonetheless he was held responsible for the deaths of those onboard.<sup>63</sup>

**Ibrahima's case illustrates how children, without access to alternative, safe routes, face not only coercion by adult intermediaries but the risk of criminalisation and punishment if they survive the journey.**

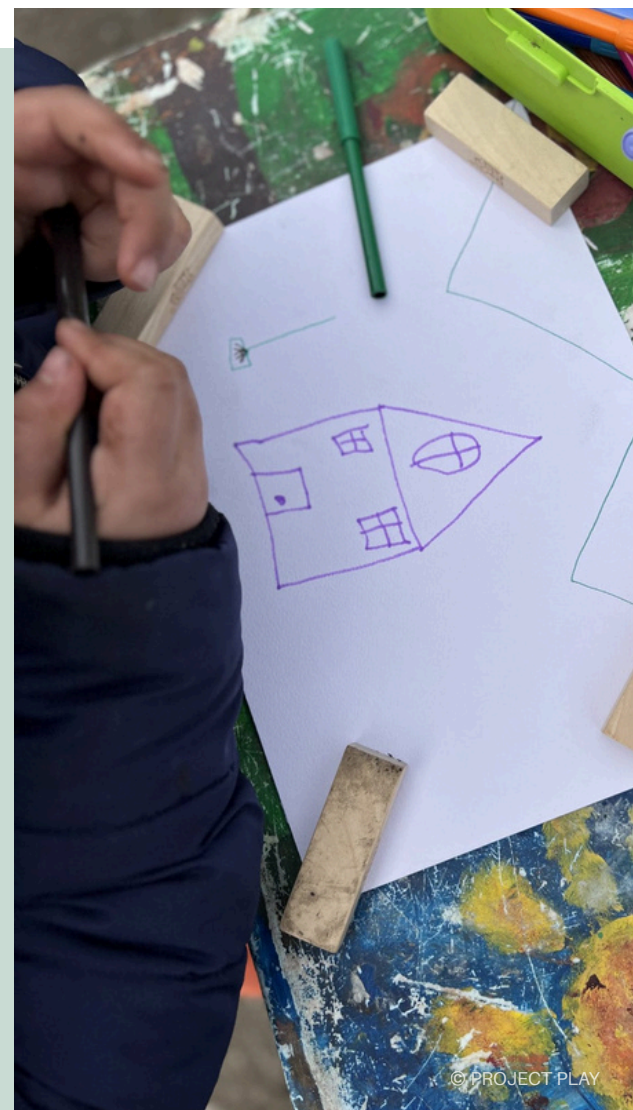
His story is not unique, but the reality facing many unaccompanied children who have arrived in the UK. For children who have experienced the trauma of Channel crossings, often fleeing conflict in their home countries and enduring long, challenging journeys to reach the shores of northern France, not only is this a miscarriage of justice, but it represents a profound failure to support them in their recovery and reintegration, a right protected in Article 39 UNCRC.

**Furthermore, Humans for Rights Network documented two instances where fathers were accused of 'facilitating' the arrival of their children in the UK, and as a result were taken to prison.<sup>64</sup> Meanwhile, their children were taken into local authority care.**

This threatens the right to family life, protected in Article 9 of the UNCRC. Once again, the costs of criminalisation were borne by children and their families.

Building on the harm created by the 2022 Act, the Illegal Migration Act 2023 further curtailed the rights of people on the move by mandating detention and removal for those arriving irregularly, regardless of circumstance.<sup>65</sup> Although the government promised to expand safe routes alongside this act, these promises remain empty.

As a result, thousands of children are at risk of criminalisation for taking journeys they have no viable alternative to. This places them at an increased risk of prolonged detention, deportation, and, with no changes to highly criticised processes for age determination, being misclassified as adults and placed in adult facilities.<sup>66</sup>





Recent legislation in the UK has resulted in myriad threats to children's rights, and is responsible for innumerable harm against children in some of the most vulnerable situations in Europe. Rather than seeking to respect international legal provisions and reverse this harm, the proposed 2025 Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill threatens to further extend these provisions.<sup>67</sup>

#### URGENT POLICY RECOMMENDATION:



**The UK government must end the criminalisation of those travelling irregularly, including boat 'captains' - reversing the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 and Illegal Migration Act 2023.**

#### 2.2.b. In France

In recent years France has also intensified its hostile stance against people on the move. The Loi Immigration (2023) introduced a number of measures restricting the rights of people not only of those moving through or seeking to remain in France, but of those settled in the country.<sup>68</sup>

The legislation removed safeguards against deportation, including for those who have lived in France for over 30 years or since childhood, and for parents whose children have French citizenship.<sup>69</sup> Accompanied with heightened barriers to residency, this places those claiming asylum in France, or those seeking to do so, in situations of increased risk and insecurity.<sup>70</sup>

The Loi Immigration (2024) also created discretionary power for the magistrate to rule on decisions to grant temporary protection, coupled with the reduction of rights to appeal.<sup>71</sup> This renders access to meaningful protection and legal support in France harder for people who need it, including children and their families.

Access to essential services for people on the move, such as healthcare and shelter, was also restricted through the 2024 legislation.<sup>72</sup> This not only limits formal entitlements, but also produces a 'chilling effect', deterring children and families from accessing services even when eligible. With many children on the move already facing routine state violence, fear of interaction with authorities deepens their exclusion and prevents them from accessing vital services and compounds the risks they face. We often encounter children and families who are scared of doctors and emergency services:

**In September 2024, a five-year-old with bad scratches on their faces looked fearful and said "no doctor, no doctor" when another child asked if they were okay. Earlier in the year, we worked with a child who was struggling with the loss of their sibling during a crossing attempt. Their parents wanted to find support for them, but were nervous to do so, lacking trust in the already limited services available.**

This law not only limits access to asylum and safety in France, but it creates new barriers preventing people on the move from accessing the services they need. This serves only to worsen the living conditions they face, and is a move in the opposite direction from the need to increase information about, and ease access to, asylum proceedings in France.

Finally, so-called boat “captains” have also been subject to criminalisation in France, after crossing attempts failed whilst still in French waters.<sup>73</sup> As in the UK context, this is despite the centrality of mitigating factors, including coercion from intermediaries and the risk of exploitation. Once again, people on the move are penalised for the lack of safe routes, a risk unaccompanied children are particularly vulnerable to.<sup>74</sup>

#### URGENT POLICY RECOMMENDATION:



**The French government must end the criminalisation of those travelling irregularly, including boat ‘captains’ - reversing the damaging provisions in the Loi Immigration 2023 & 2024.**

## 2.3. STATE VIOLENCE UNDER THE GUISE OF PROTECTION

### 2.3.a. A Bilateral Commitment to Violent Policies

In the last 30 years, a series of bilateral agreements between the UK and France have agreed co-operation and joint funding of “securitising” the border.<sup>75</sup> Although most of the activities funded by these policies are carried out by the French state, they are designed and funded in part by the UK government, who must bear joint responsibility for the results. Recent research revealed that not only is the UK government funding security actions at the border through bilateral agreements with France, but also through hundreds of contracts with private companies, providing a range of services from drones bought from Elbit systems to risk assessments carried out by BAE systems.<sup>76</sup>

**In recent years, the amount of money invested in these operations has increased astronomically. For the financial year 2020-21, the UK promised €31.4 million to France. For the financial year 2025-2026, this has ballooned to €206 million.**

This increase has largely served to fund further intelligence gathering through technologies such as drones and helicopters - sometimes ostensibly intended for search and rescue - alongside police reservists to increase the number of security forces patrolling the French coast.<sup>77</sup> Such approaches have been repeatedly shown to fail at their stated aim of deterrence, instead serving to make journeys more dangerous.<sup>78</sup>



Increased funding for joint security operations has primarily served to facilitate interceptions by authorities.<sup>79</sup> Not only are these interceptions frequently violent and traumatic, but they do not prevent crossings. Instead, they force people - including children - into repeated, traumatic and riskier attempts.

So long as safe routes remain inaccessible to the majority of those who need them, people will continue to make the deadly journey across the Channel.

Increased violent deterrence instead results in a deadly paradox - rather than preventing people from crossing, they force people into situations of heightened danger.

The sharp rise in deaths on the UK-France border cannot be divorced from the broader political context of a rise in hostility to migration in both countries. The dominance of the “stop the boats” slogan in the 2024 Conservative Party election campaign created immense pressure to demonstrate ‘results’ to this end.

**In this climate, the UK Home Office began publishing data on maritime interceptions - whilst still failing to record and publish data on those killed during crossings, despite repeated calls from NGOs.<sup>80</sup> This reflects a dehumanising misalignment of priorities, where the deaths of people, including children, are deliberate administrative blind spots.**

### 2.3.b. “Search and Rescue”, or Surveillance?

Despite frequent claims from the French and UK government that their policies in the Channel are focused on saving lives, NGOs have documented many incidents where state intervention was too little or too late.<sup>81</sup> In some of these instances, people lost their lives as a result of failures to intervene.

France and the UK have invested millions in state of the art surveillance technology, in theory allowing for rapid and effective responses to life-threatening situations, but in fact operations ostensibly focused on saving lives in the Channel often prioritise surveillance for interception.<sup>82</sup>

One example of this is the use of aircraft by Frontex for the surveillance of land rather than sea, where it would be more able to prevent and assist in life-threatening crossings.<sup>83</sup>

The strategy of prioritising surveillance over safety is not novel for Frontex, but have become increasingly common for both the UK and French governments.<sup>84</sup>



### URGENT POLICY RECOMMENDATION:

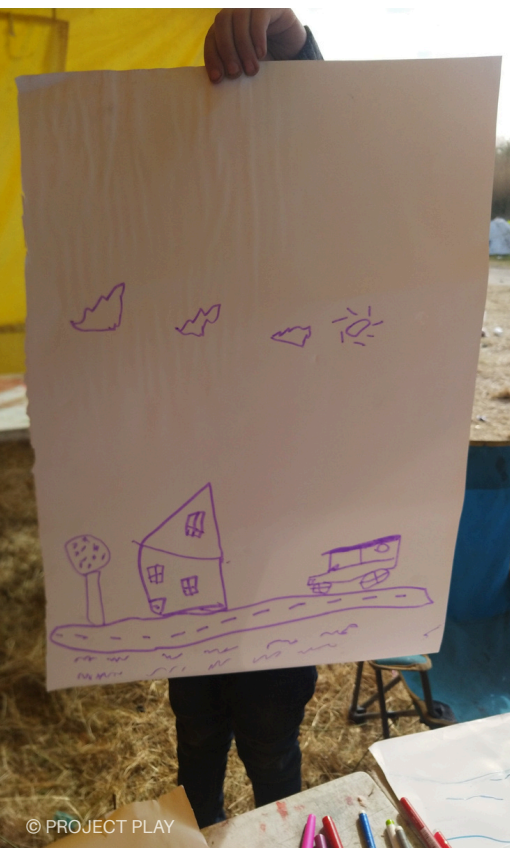


**The UK and France should demonstrate accountability for incidents and fatalities in the Channel, committing to genuine life-saving operations and publishing data on those killed.**



## 2.4. SUMMARY: 2024 - DEADLY BY DESIGN

The UK-France border is becoming increasingly deadly - particularly for children. This is not an inevitable tragedy, but the result of political choices: intersecting, violent policies jointly pursued and funded by the UK and French governments. Criminalisation, surveillance, the erosion of safe routes and systemic failures to ensure access to asylum converge to create a landscape in which children and families are repeatedly pushed into danger.



### Findings from Section 2:

- The UK-France border is a site of systematic violence and rising, preventable child fatalities.
- 2024 saw a devastating and disproportionate increase in child deaths, with neither government taking responsibility for incidents in the Channel. Whilst data is published on interceptions, no data is published on fatalities - illustrating a failure to treat those crossing with dignity and meaning deaths are likely underreported.
- These outcomes are the product of political choices, including:
  - The erosion of accessible, safe routes to asylum, reflecting a broader European trend that leaves many feeling the UK is their last chance at safety.
  - The criminalisation of people on the move, including unaccompanied children prosecuted as small boat 'captains'.
  - Bilateral securitisation efforts between the UK and France which prioritise border control over human life, fuelling surveillance and violent interceptions under the guise of life-saving operations.

The policies and practices documented in this section contravene the UK and France's international legal obligations under:

#### The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child:

- A.6:** Right to life, survival and development
- A.16:** Right to privacy
- A.19:** Right to be free from violence
- A.22:** Specific protections for refugee children
- A.37:** Protection against imprisonment with adults
- A.39:** Support for children recovering from trauma

**The 1951 Refugee Convention** - Right to seek asylum without penalty for irregular entry



**"If I knew there was a 1% chance that I could keep the kids in Belgium or France or Sweden or Finland I would keep them there".**

- Ahmed - father of Sara, who was killed at the border.

To prevent further harm and future fatalities, we recommend that the UK and France:



#### Urgently:

- **Demonstrate accountability** for Channel crossings - publishing data on fatalities and committing to genuine life-saving operations.
- **End the criminalisation** of those arriving irregularly, including small boat 'captains', and revoke damaging legislation.

#### In the short-term:

- **Ensure safe, accessible and adapted routes to asylum** are available to all who need them.

#### In the long-term:

- **Work to become European leaders** in promoting human rights and ending hostility to migration.

## Section 3:

# VIOLENCE IN LIVING SITES



## 3.1. EVICTIONS, SECURITISATION AND “ZERO POINT OF FIXATION”

Since the end of the ‘Big Jungle’ in Calais in 2016, and the closure of La Liniere in Grand Synthe in 2017, the French authorities have pursued a policy of “Zero Points of Fixation” which includes evicting informal living sites regularly.<sup>85</sup> During these evictions, police establish a “perimeter” around a living site and clear everything out from within it. This means tents and other personal belongings can be seized, and sporadic arrests are often made.

In Calais, these evictions tend to happen three times per week. In Grand Synthe, evictions are less frequent, but more often of a larger scale, involving people being put onto buses to be taken to accommodation centres far from the coast. Whilst such ‘large scale’ evictions are actioned in Calais, they are rarer, actioned periodically amidst the regular weekly evictions.

HRO recorded  
**764 evictions**  
in and around Calais  
and Dunkirk.\*

**50% of  
sessions**  
Project Play ran in  
Calais were disrupted  
by evictions.\*

Human Rights Observers (HRO) monitor these evictions and document the ways in which they are carried out - often entailing violence, theft of personal objects, and lack of communication by translators employed to speak with people on the move.<sup>86</sup>

In 2021, Human Rights Watch released a report detailing the ways in which this policy constitutes degrading treatment of adults and children, yet it continues to be enacted day to day in Calais and Grand Synthe.<sup>87</sup>

In 2024, HRO recorded 764 evictions in Calais, Grande-Synthe and the surrounding areas. This was an increase of 11% compared to 2023, demonstrating one element of the ‘increased securitisation’ of the border in practice. It also means an average of 2 evictions per day.<sup>88</sup> Of the sessions Project Play ran in Calais in 2024, half were interrupted by an eviction.

It is thus highly likely that the majority of children at the border frequently experienced these operations in 2024.<sup>89</sup>

\*In 2024



As Project Play, we witnessed the impact of evictions and other violent securitisation tactics on the children we worked with throughout 2024 in three main ways: disruption to living conditions, psychological impact and disruption of the right to play. Partner organisations also noted particular risks for unaccompanied children during evictions.



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### 3.1.a. Disruption to Living Conditions

Evictions cause regular disruption to the already precarious living conditions of children on the move. People in the informal living sites are unable to install any infrastructure which cannot be moved out of the perimeter during evictions, limiting the stability of the environment. Furthermore, families have to move their tents during each eviction and often have belongings, including tents and sleeping bags, confiscated. For instance:

**In August 2024, the mother of a 3-year-old and a 7-year-old told us their tent had been taken by police the previous night in a living site in Calais.**

Losing vital items which help keep children warm can lead to physical harm of children, alongside the psychological damage of losing treasured belongings, including toys. The constant threat of eviction creates stress for parents and children, knowing that they may have to uproot their shelter at any time. It also means what little hope children had of a settled home, even within a tent, is undermined by perpetual uncertainty.

**Article 27 of the UNCRC** states that every child has the right to a standard of living good enough to meet their physical and social needs and support their development. As States Parties to this convention, the **French and UK governments are failing in their obligations to ensure this right** - the French government by carrying out these evictions, and the UK government by helping fund them.





### 3.1.b. Psychological Impact

At Project Play, we frequently observe children who are scared of the police. Although the exact cause of such fears is not always clear, there are instances where this is a clear result of eviction operations. Children as young as two-years-old expressed their fear of the police to us, whether verbally or through body language. Children often hid behind members of our team when police drove past during our sessions.

**It is clear that police are often foremost in children's minds. Project Play observed children frequently playing police role play games involving guns and knives. Even the most innocuous seeming game was often linked to police - for example, one 14-year-old compared a cat's cradle to handcuffs, and said they wished escaping handcuffs was as easy as the game.**

Playing out traumatic experiences can be a valuable way of processing them, and we try to create space for children to engage in police play within our sessions. However, this can trigger fear in other children engaging in the session. For example, in December 2024 an 11-year-old pretended to ring the police on a toy phone, prompting other children to become upset and expressing that they didn't like what he was doing.

**“On 16th October 2024, we were playing with some children at a living site. A 3-year-old started shouting police over and over and lining up cars into different formations, like the eviction convoy.**

**He was in a heightened emotional state and very disregulated. Then other children started to play police 'games', including being quiet so the police wouldn't find them and hiding from the police under tables.”**

- Ilias, Welfare Coordinator, Project Play



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### 3.1.c. The Right to Play

Police operations have often disrupted Project Play sessions. This can happen directly, for example by police blocking the entrance to living sites during eviction operations, and indirectly, when children are distracted and emotionally dysregulated as a result of police presence, meaning they struggle to engage in play.

**“On one occasion, twin 8-year-old brothers told me that they couldn’t come and play because they had to keep watch for the police, in case they came for an eviction.”**

*- Elena Ewence, Safeguarding Coordinator, Project Play*

During one Project Play session in June 2024, a 6-year-old was completely distracted due to the presence of a police vehicle, even though it was there to accompany an ambulance rather than for an eviction. Sometimes families return to their tents together to stay out of the way of the police, meaning children miss the opportunity to join our sessions and play.

Police evictions affected 1 in 2 of the play sessions Project Play carried out at living sites in Calais in 2024. Further, children struggled to focus on play when our service was there, offering a dedicated space within the living site to play, and with activities facilitated by adults. Not only was this disruptive to our sessions, but we expect that when Project Play is not present, children would struggle even further to relax and play - with the threat of police evictions constantly present and often a reality.

Police operations in living sites have time and again damaged children’s psychological wellbeing, through disrupting their living conditions, stimulating fear and limiting their access to play.

**Article 31 of the UNCRC states that every child has the right to play. These police operations, funded by the UK government and enacted by the French state, block children from accessing this right.**



### 3.1.d. Unaccompanied Children

In 2024, MSF found that the state fails to protect unaccompanied children during evictions.

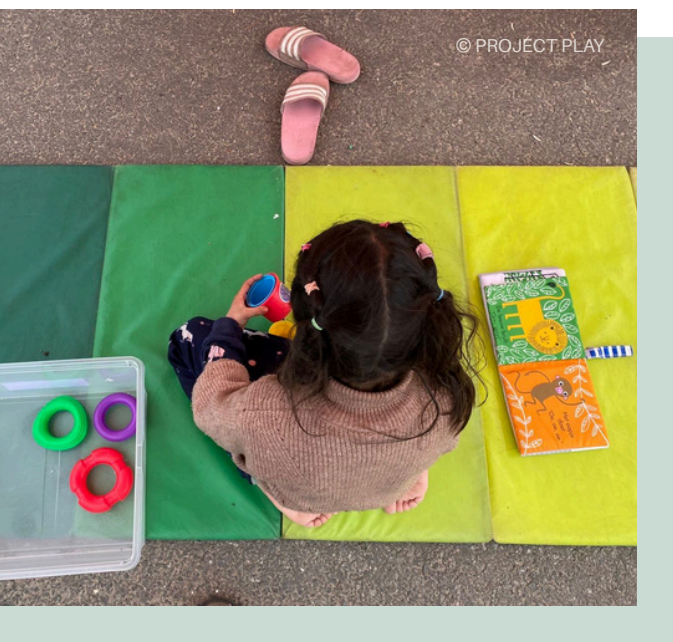
**Unaccompanied children are not identified due to a lack of social and health assessments before evictions and, as a result, are subjected to the same aggressive treatment as adults - including being attacked with rubber bullets and tear gas, and enduring racist abuse.**

This is in spite of their added vulnerability due to their age, which should not only be identified but also entitle them to extra support from the police and social services.<sup>90</sup>

#### SHORT-TERM POLICY RECOMMENDATION:



**France must cease all violent operations, including surveillance, and end the 'Zero Point of Fixation' policy. The UK must halt funding for them.**



**"We'd often arrive at the living site to find the police blocking the entrance. We'd have to wait until the eviction finished before we could start our play session, meaning the children missed some of their chance to play.**

**When they did join our session, sometimes they'd be emotionally dysregulated after the eviction, so they would struggle to join in with activities."**

*- Kizzy, Volunteer, Project Play*

## 3.2. REFUSAL OF SERVICES AS VIOLENCE

Securitisation on the border also contributes to deaths unrelated to crossing attempts. People stuck on the border often endure months or years in limbo, facing violent police action, degrading living conditions, vehicle accidents and severe mental health distress. In recent years, children have been killed as a result of this general climate of violence and securitisation which defines the UK-France border.



In 2024, we worked with a family of four children from Libya, whose 10-month-old baby, Mohammed, died in Calais as a result of health complications. Mohammed's family were unable to access the support and services they needed.

His death illustrates failures not only to ensure access to the right to seek asylum, but to adequate health care, child protection, shelter and so many other basic, essential rights to which each child should have access. If safe routes to cross to the UK were available, or Mohammed's family had felt able to claim asylum in France and received adequate support whilst doing so, his death may have been avoided.



This lack of support and services impacts every single child we work with. Children with specific vulnerabilities are at particular risk, and face additional challenges to accessing support. In August 2024, the mother of a child we worked with asked us if we knew of an organisation that might be able to support her crossing with a wheelchair.

Project Play has previously reported on the dangerous impacts of the lack of essential services on children in northern France, and unfortunately we have observed the continuation of this harm to children in subsequent years, including 2024.<sup>91</sup> This is not simply a matter of neglect and inadequate access to services, but the result of joint and intersecting hostile policies on both sides of the Channel.

These policies proliferate violence, a lack of access to asylum, and leave people trapped for extended periods whilst enduring dangerous, degrading living conditions.

**Children face routine and systematic violations of their rights under the UNCRC as a result of these intersecting policies - including the right to non-discrimination (Article 2), the right to life, survival and development (Article 6), the right to special care and assistance for children with disabilities (Article 23), and the right to an adequate standard of living (Article 27).**



Each child is entitled to specific protection and support to access their rights - yet, the UK and France continually neglect their international obligations, leaving children exposed to harm. This is particularly true for children with multiple vulnerabilities, such as disabilities.

#### LONG-TERM POLICY RECOMMENDATION:



**France and the UK must commit to creating genuine policies of welcome, prioritising the dignity and human rights of people seeking safety.**



### 3.3. SUMMARY: VIOLENCE IN LIVING SITES



The increased use of police evictions, constant surveillance and denial of essential services in 2024 reflect the intensifying securitisation of the UK-France border. These actions are not isolated incidents but part of state-led strategies of deterrence, enacted by the French government and heavily funded by the UK. For children living in informal sites, this results in daily harm, restricted rights and conditions which are degrading, traumatic and, at times, fatal.

#### Findings from Section 3:

- Police evictions are frequent, violent and systematically disrupt children's lives. In 2024, HRO recorded 764 eviction operations in and around Calais and Dunkirk - an average of two per day. Evictions disrupted children's limited stability and left them without shelter.
- Children were subjected to physical harm during evictions - especially unaccompanied minors, who are often treated as adults and exposed to tear gas, rubber bullets and police aggression.
- Evictions cause serious psychological distress, with children displaying signs of trauma and fear, particularly in response to police presence and constant aerial surveillance.
- Children's right to play was regularly disrupted - in 2024, 50% of Project Play sessions in Calais were directly affected by eviction operations, and many others were indirectly affected as children struggled to engage as a result of fear and emotional dysregulation.
- Living conditions constituted violence in themselves, marked by inadequate shelter, healthcare and sanitation. The French government's failure to provide essential services compounds the risks facing children on the border, particularly endangering those with multiple vulnerabilities. 10-month-old Mohammed died in 2024 due to health complications whilst his family was unable to access healthcare.



The policies and practices documented in this section contravene the UK and France's international legal obligations under:

#### The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child:

- A.2: Non-discrimination
- A.6: Right to life, survival and development
- A.16: Right to privacy
- A.19: Protection from violence
- A.20: Special protection for children without family
- A.24: Right to health and healthcare
- A.27: Right to an adequate standard of living
- A.31: Right to play, leisure and culture
- A.37: Protection from inhuman or degrading treatment
- A.39: Support for children recovering from trauma

To prevent further harm and future fatalities, we recommend that the UK and France:

#### In the short-term:

- **End all forms of violence on the border.** This requires France to cease all violent operations, and the UK to halt funding for them.

#### In the long-term:

- **Commit to creating genuine policies of welcome,** prioritising the dignity and human rights of people seeking safety.



## Section 4:

# THE VIOLENCE OF CROSSING ATTEMPTS



For almost all those stuck at the border in northern France, the only options for crossing are irregular routes - including attempting to cross in a lorry or a small boat. These are inherently dangerous things to attempt, involving significant risk of death. The fact that there are no safe ways to cross for these people, meaning they have no choice but to risk their lives, constitutes violence in itself.

The French and UK governments claim that intercepting those seeking to cross is essential to save lives, but in reality these tactics do not prevent crossings - without safe routes, people will continue to make these journeys. Instead, violent policies of securitisation create an increased risk of fatality, and are a source of profound physical and psychological harm for those who survive.

## 4.1. INCREASED RISK OF PHYSICAL HARM

Increasing securitisation has heightened the risk of children experiencing physical harm - including serious injuries and death. As reported by Alarmphone, deadly incidents involving small boat crossings occur most frequently during embarkation as a direct result of police violence and the dangerous conditions it creates.<sup>92</sup>

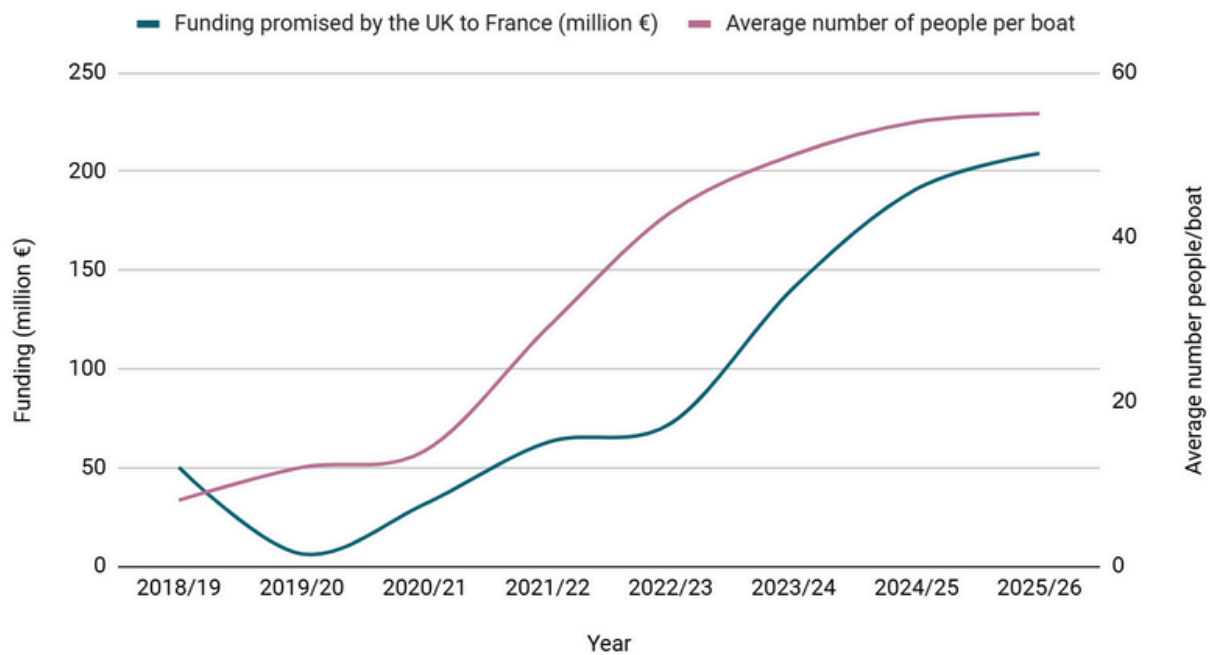
This is the result of myriad factors, including an increased frequency of overcrowding, violent police interceptions, the adoption of new routes to evade interception and violence from intermediaries, all of which are compounded by an increased refusal to provide material support to survivors of crossing attempts.

### 4.1.a. Overcrowding of Boats

There is a direct link between increased funding for border securitisation and the growing risk associated with such journeys - including through the overcrowding of boats.<sup>93</sup>

As the graph below shows, recent years have seen a significant increase in the average number of people boarding each boat during crossing attempts. This directly correlates with the rise in the UK's investment in securitisation action in northern France, supporting existing evidence that deterrence policies serve not to prevent crossings, but to make them more dangerous.





**Figure 1: UK Spending on Securitisation vs Average Number of People per Boat.**

*Graph created using UK Home Office crossings data and House of Commons research on funding.<sup>94</sup>*

**These figures illustrate a near five-fold increase in the amount of UK taxpayer money promised to France for border securitisation.**

The majority of this is spent on resources, including for the purchasing of surveillance equipment such as drones, helicopters and hunting cameras.<sup>95</sup> Alongside material spending, the UK also contributes to the funding of police patrols.<sup>96</sup>

These technologies, and the personnel who use them, enable police interceptions - both of boats for crossing and of people during crossing attempts. Fewer boats available and fewer successful attempts do not prevent people from crossing, instead, they increase the number of people in each boat. This frequently leads to dangerous levels of overcrowding, increasing the risk of shipwreck as well as death resulting from crush injuries.<sup>97</sup>

**This poses specific dangers to children.** The Refugee Council highlights reports of children being placed in the centre of boats in an attempt to protect them from falling out - exacerbating the risk of crushing in situations of overcrowding and drowning should the boat collapse.<sup>98</sup> Indeed, **at least three of the children killed in 2024 died as a result of crush injuries:**

**Sara, aged 7**, was killed on the 23rd April 2024 after being crushed in an overcrowded boat. Alarmphone reported that the use of tear gas by police against those boarding had created panic and led to a rushed departure from the beach.<sup>99</sup>

6 months later, on the 5th October 2024, **Mansur, aged 2**, was killed as a result of asphyxiation from crushing.<sup>100</sup>

Twelve days later, **4-month-old Maryam** was killed as a result of asphyxiation from being crushed when the overcrowded boat her family boarded folded in on itself.<sup>101</sup>

For children, these situations are dangerous and frightening. On multiple occasions, children and parents spoke to Project Play about overcrowding they experienced on boats during crossing attempts.

In August 2024, a father of four children said they'd had a problem at the beaches with the police and with too many people on the boats, and that he was scared. On another occasion, a 7-year-old told us they had witnessed people falling out of the boat during a crossing attempt in October 2024, and that they had had to swim to safety. Meanwhile, she said, the police shouted at them.

**Three days after a deadly shipwreck in September 2024, a child told us that they'd been in a boat which had too many people and began filling with water. She told us her little brother was still coughing days later because he had swallowed sea water, and had been in hospital. She said her father had broken his hand to put them into the rescue boat, and that more than ten people had died.**

#### 4.1.b. Interception on the Beaches

The increased overcrowding of boats is compounded by heightened instances of violent police interception on the beaches.

In 2024, Project Play and our partner organisations in northern France observed an intensification of police violence and repression, particularly in relation to small boat departures. Utopia 56 recorded 264 incidents of police violence in this context, including the use of tear gas and stabbing inflatable boats, a trend mirrored in the regular reports of violence on the beaches we received from children throughout 2024.

These incidents regularly involved the police using tear gas against people in an attempt to disperse those hoping to cross. This included the use of tear gas against families with extremely young children.



**In May 2024, we worked with a 2 month old baby who had painful, irritated eyes as a result of the tear gas used against their family.**

Due to their small size, higher breath rate and limited cardiovascular stress response, children are at particular risk of short and long term health impacts as a result of tear gas exposure.<sup>102</sup> This is compounded by the height at which canisters are deployed, rendering children more likely to receive higher doses of the chemical agent.<sup>103</sup>

In August 2024, an 8-year-old told us they had been chased by the police. They described that the police had something that looked like a gun and sprayed something at them - they pointed to the clouds in the sky and said it looked like that, and coughed to imitate the effects.

Children may not understand the weapons police are using on them, but that doesn't protect them from being targeted.

“One mother told me about her experience on the beach. The men went to put the boat in the water and the police put tear gas there and they stabbed the boat. The police then came and put the gas on the families who were in the dunes further away from the sea. They threw the gas and everything around them was red. There were 9 or 10 families...



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...there was lots of gas, lots of people lost their family and didn't know where they were. She did not know where her husband was or her kids - she was just with one of her children who is allergic to gas. She has four children and the youngest is 14 months. There were other children and babies as young as 9 months old who were also gassed. She has allergy hypothyroidism and it affected her breathing lots.”

- Elena Ewence, Safeguarding Coordinator, Project Play





Another trend observed both by Project Play and Utopia 56 was **police slashing inflatable boats as people boarded them.**

In March 2024, a child aged 7 told us they'd tried to cross the previous night, but that police had stabbed the boat and shouted at them. They told us that it was bad to do that to children, and then got upset when another child started talking about the police.

Returning from a crossing attempt in June 2024, an 11-year-old told us that they'd tried to go to England, but the police had put a knife in their boat.

Three months later, a 5-year-old told us that they'd just come back from a crossing attempt, and that their boat had been stabbed by the police.

This slashing of boats further exacerbates the risk posed to children and their families. Not only compounding the likelihood of overcrowding and panic during attempts, the stabbing of boats which are afloat in the water risks people falling in, directly exposing them to the risk of drowning and hypothermia. On a number of occasions, children came to our sessions with their clothes still soaked from crossing attempts.

We also worked with a number of children who experienced injuries when attempting to escape the police or as a result of interceptions during crossing attempts.

**In June 2024, we met two children with injured legs following crossing attempts, one of whom was having to use crutches. In October 2024, we met an 8-year-old with scratches on her face. She explained she got them whilst running through the woods after a failed crossing attempt, being chased by either police or intermediaries.**

Whilst the exact source of these injuries was unclear, the fact that families cannot access safe alternatives to life-threatening small boat crossings, violently policed by the state, puts children in physical danger.

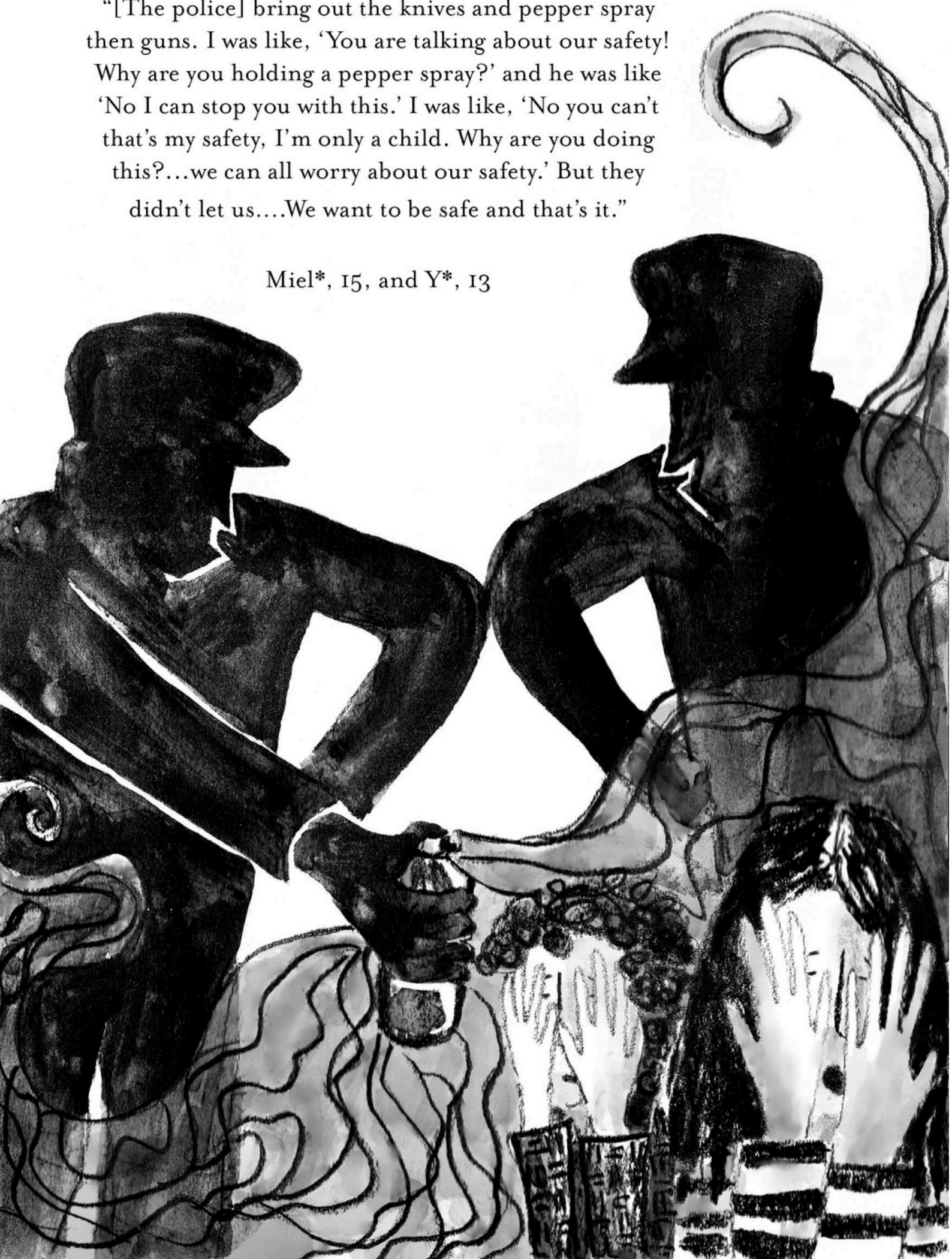
Alongside the UK government's multi-million-pound investment in border securitisation, the French government also bears responsibility for funding, and executing, the surveillance and interceptions leading to the increase in dangerous and fatal crossing attempts.<sup>104</sup> This cross-border co-operation is often justified as an attempt to save lives. Instead, it puts children at direct risk of serious injury and death, whilst exposing them to traumatic, violent experiences.



**Under Article 19 UNCRC, children have the right to be protected from all forms of violence. States Parties to the Convention, including France and the UK, have the duty to protect them from violence. Yet, the experiences of children on the border illustrates that, far from protecting children from violence, the strategies enacted by French authorities and funded by the UK government, expose them to it.**

"[The police] bring out the knives and pepper spray then guns. I was like, 'You are talking about our safety! Why are you holding a pepper spray?' and he was like 'No I can stop you with this.' I was like, 'No you can't that's my safety, I'm only a child. Why are you doing this?...we can all worry about our safety.' But they didn't let us....We want to be safe and that's it."

Miel\*, 15, and Y\*, 13



### 4.1.c. Increasingly Dangerous Routes

An additional consequence of increased violence in 2024 was a rise in crossing attempts beginning further along the coast and via inland waterways, as people sought to evade police interception. This shift compounded the existing risks associated with crossing attempts, increasing the distance people had to travel and, with it, the likelihood of something going wrong. It also introduced new dangers - for example, the deep water of canals and inland waterways means people are immediately out of their depth, increasing the risk of drowning in the event of capsizing or falling overboard.

**In March 2024, 7-year-old Roula drowned in a canal 30 km from the coast at the start of an attempt to cross the Channel.<sup>105</sup> Her family were among those attempting to cross from the canal to avoid being intercepted by police on the beaches. This was an additional risk due directly to the securitisation of the border, which tragically killed Roula.**



One of the most common impacts on children was **exhaustion after long walks related to crossing attempts**. Due to high police presence on many beaches, those attempting to cross often have to walk long distances to cross from more hidden places.

In March 2024, the father of a 6-year-old told us they had walked 6 hours to reach a crossing attempt, after which the police had stopped them from crossing.

Parents frequently described worries about their children being tired after such incidents. For example:

In August 2024 an 11-year-old was crying, and their mother told us they'd had to walk all night so were very tired.

Meanwhile, police often stop people using public transport when they believe they are going to try to cross, which increases the distance people have to walk to get to the beaches. At the end of 2024, a new local policy introduced police ID checks on certain bus routes to try and prevent people from reaching beaches easily. In 2024, we observed that these long walks have a detrimental impact on the psychological and physical wellbeing of children, who often mentioned it during our sessions or fell asleep during the day.

### 4.1.d. Violence from Intermediaries

Due to the lack of accessible safe routes, most crossings are arranged by intermediaries. Intermediaries are often violent towards those attempting to cross, including towards those who have arranged to cross when conflict arises, as it often can in these tense and overcrowded situations. Often, people who have not arranged or paid to cross try to join a departing boat. This is frequently due to not having enough money to pay an intermediary to cross.<sup>106</sup> These people are often met with violence from intermediaries.



Unaccompanied children are more likely to have limited financial resources, meaning they are more likely to join crossing attempts without paying and are particularly vulnerable to violence from intermediaries. ECPAT France noted that this was the primary source of violence against the unaccompanied children they worked with in 2024.

**Increased securitisation of the border has only bolstered the power of intermediaries, as individuals are less able to cross without someone else organising it for them. This exposes children to violence and exploitation. The only way to safeguard children against violence from intermediaries is by ensuring they have access to safe routes to asylum.**

Unaccompanied children are also more likely than other people on the move to try and cross in lorries, rather than small boats. In 2024, Utopia 56 recorded calls from 103 unaccompanied children following failed lorry crossing attempts. One reason for this is that it does not require paying an intermediary.

However, this exposes these children to further dangers, including violent attacks from drivers. In 2024, Utopia 56 recorded 4 instances of violence from lorry drivers towards unaccompanied children, but such incidents are likely significantly underreported. Lorry crossings also carry multiple other risks to physical health, including asphyxiation and being hit by traffic whilst attempting to climb into a truck. Once again, unaccompanied children are left particularly vulnerable to these dangers.

**Alongside their obligations to protect children from violence (Article 19) and exploitation (Article 36), states must also provide specific care and protection to unaccompanied children under Article 20 of the UNCRC. The failure of the UK and France to ensure accessible safe routes - instead increasing border securitisation - pushes children toward intermediaries, exposing them to violence and exploitation.**



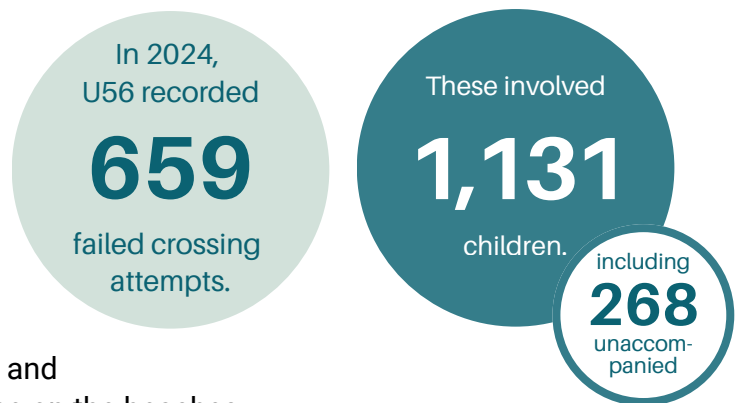
#### SHORT-TERM POLICY RECOMMENDATION:



**France must cease all violent operations, including surveillance, and end the 'Zero Point of Fixation' policy. The UK must halt funding for them.**

#### 4.1.e. Failed Crossings: State Failure to Provide Support

Failed crossings, whether as a result of police intervention or due to overcrowded boats, are traumatic to experience both physically and psychologically. In 2024, Utopia 56 encountered 14,538 people involved in 659 failed crossing attempts. Among these were 1,131 children, 268 of whom were unaccompanied.



This was a marked increase from previous years. and a direct consequence of increased police presence on the beaches.

**In the vast majority of our sessions in 2024, children spoke of failed crossing attempts, telling us that they had experienced violence and near-drowning incidents, witnessed deaths and feared for their safety and the safety of their loved ones.**

These events often involve large numbers of people and confusion as to what is happening, which can be psychologically distressing to be part of. People can end up in cold water for too long, introducing the risk of hypothermia, particularly when coupled with a lack of support after shipwrecks.

**In February 2024, an unaccompanied 16-year-old told us that he had tried to cross, but everyone had gotten wet and cold after the motor failed. After this experience he was scared to attempt to cross again, and asked Project Play for advice about how to cross without using a boat.**

Following failed crossing attempts, people are often wet and stranded in remote places. They can also be suffering mentally from the experience of attempting and failing to cross. Yet the French authorities rarely respond to the needs of these individuals, including children.



French police often encountered families after crossing attempts, yet failed to offer accommodation, dry clothes or any appropriate support. Support for people who have experienced failed crossing attempts rarely came from the state, with gaps filled by NGOs such as Utopia 56. For example:

In May 2024, we encountered a family who said they had to walk for 3 hours to try and find somewhere safe to sleep after being stopped by the police. They were wet following a failed crossing attempt.

In October 2024, we met an 8-year-old wearing trousers which had been soaked by water. As the NGO who usually provided clothes were unable to do so that day, she could not replace her trousers.

Utopia 56 found many instances where the state neglected to provide fundamental support for unaccompanied children after crossing attempts.

**In 2024, Utopia 56 recorded 43 incidents where unaccompanied children sought accommodation after failed crossing attempts and were refused - in spite of the specific legal obligations the French authorities have to ensure unaccompanied children have access to shelter.**

The 43 instances of this state neglect are only those recorded and the real number is almost certainly far higher. Furthermore, this was the number who Utopia 56 recorded as having asked for shelter and been refused. It is likely that many more unaccompanied children were present but didn't request accommodation, and that it was not proposed by the state.

**Article 39 of the UNCRC states that children who have been subjected to traumatic experiences must receive adapted support, yet following failed crossing attempts the French government is failing to ensure this need is met.**



**Instead, when the French authorities interact with survivors of shipwrecks it is usually to detain and interrogate them.**<sup>107</sup>

This is a violent and harmful response to people who have just experienced a traumatic event.

Furthermore, families of those who have died are left without state support in the process of accessing services, speaking to the police or organising funerals. Once again, NGOs and activist groups are left to do what they can for people living through the unspeakable tragedy of losing a loved one.<sup>108</sup>

When people arrive in the UK after crossing, they are also subject to interactions with the authorities, including their asylum screening interview, soon after arrival. There is little psychological support available, even for those who have witnessed death and other traumatic events during their crossing.

#### URGENT POLICY RECOMMENDATION:



**The UK and France should demonstrate accountability for incidents in the Channel, including improving the material and psychological support offered to failed crossing survivors.**



“An 8-year-old I had met a few times told me about the time when she tried to cross and nearly drowned. She stood up to act it out and mimed coughing up water and struggling to breathe. She said the boat her friend might cross in could sink.

She told me she had had to run away from the police and said she got hurt from falling onto some rocks. She had also been tear-gassed by the police which meant she had to be hospitalised for two days.”

- Lily MacTaggart, Advocacy Coordinator, Project Play



## 4.2. PSYCHOLOGICAL AND EMOTIONAL HARM

The psychological impact of past and potential crossing attempts on children was something our team encountered time and again during 2024. While we have always observed how these experiences affect the children we work with, 2024 marked an unprecedented escalation - not only in the number of testimonies and disclosures shared with us, but in their severity.

We received a growing volume of concerning accounts from children and notes of concern for children's wellbeing from our team, as a result of heightened police violence, increasing rates of near-drowning experiences and children witnessing fatalities during crossing attempts.

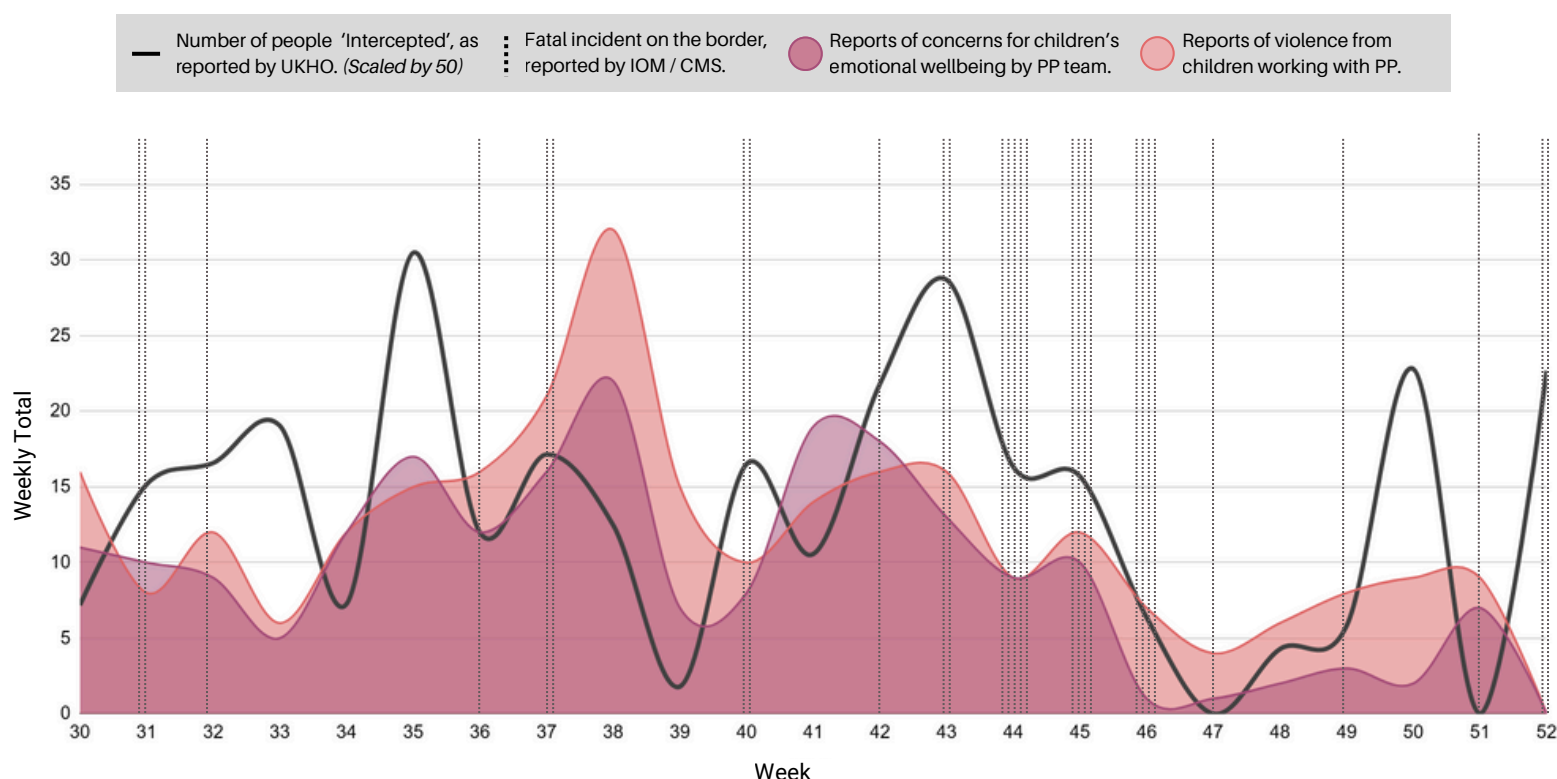
**This impact was twofold, as children were constantly thinking about getting to the UK, often convinced a better life lay ahead of them there, yet simultaneously, they were terrified of trying to cross in small boats.**

Although we are not well placed to observe the long-term experiences of the children we encounter in northern France, it is likely these psychological impacts are enduring and will continue to affect these children in the long-term.<sup>110</sup>



**Article 22 of the UNCRC protects the rights of refugee children and those seeking refuge - governments must ensure these children have appropriate and specific assistance and protection. Yet, the UK and French governments repeatedly fail to adapt any services to support children on the UK-France border. Instead, they are faced with multiple sources of violence, contravening Article 27 of the UNCRC.**

The graph below illustrates the relationship between state interceptions, fatal incidents and the emotional and psychological wellbeing of children at the UK-France border in the second, and most deadly, half of 2024.



**Figure 2: Mapping Interceptions and Fatal Incidents with Children's Emotional Wellbeing and Reports of Violence**  
Graph created using UK Home Office interceptions data and Project Play internal data.

**The largest spikes in the number of children experiencing violence, disclosing about crossing and displaying emotional well-being concerns directly follow periods of intensified interceptions. This suggests increased, violent securitisation has a directly harmful impact on the wellbeing of children.**

Some exceptions to this pattern can be explained by children remaining present on the border for longer periods, and the prolonged impact of previous experiences on their wellbeing. For instance, whilst weeks 46-49 saw a reduced rate of interceptions, the majority of children reporting experiences violence to us had been present during the six previous weeks of particularly intense interceptions and regular fatalities.

In addition, weeks in which fatal incidents occurred were typically followed by, or coincided with, notable increases in children's psychological distress, confirming the traumatic effects of witnessing or being aware of deaths at the border.

Policies of deterrence have been repeatedly shown to be ineffective in achieving their stated aim - people will continue to make the journey until they have safe alternatives.<sup>111</sup> This data shows that violent interceptions exacerbate trauma for children, both through direct experiences of, and secondary exposure to, violence and death. Beyond the numbers, this is clear in the children's own words and the experiences they recounted to our team.

#### 4.2.a. Fear of Crossing

Children often asked our teams about the UK, and their hopes for a better life there, describing the homes and pets they hope to have after crossing to the UK. In April 2024, a 12-year-old told us they would have a dog and a cat after they arrived in the UK. A common experience for the Project Play team in 2024 was for children to tell us they wouldn't see us again because they would be in the UK tomorrow.



Children would ask us detailed questions about crossing and how to keep safe. They would also often **express that they were scared of crossing in boats**. For instance:

In August 2024 one 9-year-old kept telling a Project Play volunteer that she was scared of getting in the boat and falling in the water.

It is often older children, over the age of 10, who express these fears, perhaps due to an increased awareness of the risks associated with crossing compared to their younger siblings or peers:

In December 2024 two 11-year-olds told us that they were worried about drowning.

In February 2024, an unaccompanied 16-year-old was scared to cross and asked Project Play if any family could adopt him so that he wouldn't have to cross by going in a boat.

However, younger children were also fearful of crossing:

In September 2024, a 7-year-old said they were scared to cross because the boat looked scary as there were too many people on it.

As the words of these children show, the overcrowding discussed in Section 4.1.a. was noticed by, and frightened, children. Past crossing experiences often created fear for subsequent attempts. In October 2024, a 7-year-old told us they would try to cross that evening, and then mentioned previous attempts involving being attacked by the police and witnessing a shipwreck.

**Overall, we have consistently observed an ongoing level of fear for many children waiting to cross which has a huge impact on their mental health.**



Parents were also often worried about crossing and the impact it would have on their children. In January 2024, the mother of a 6-year-old told us she was stressed because they can't get to the UK yet, and that the sea was scary at that time.

In turn, children could sense their parents' fear and their own mental health was affected by it. In December 2024, one 12-year-old told us she wanted to punch an intermediary because her mother was so worried about crossing that she cried.



Many children also **expressed their preoccupation with crossing in art and play** during our sessions. Children often drew boats or cartoons of people attempting to cross the Channel.

In January 2024, a child made noises like an engine and pretended to drive a boat.

In April 2024, two children made paper boats and talked about them being in the water, while another child talked about wanting to go to England.

In May 2024, a 5-year-old built a Lego ship and said it was going to the UK. They said the Jungle was finished and that everyone was going to the UK.

In September 2024, an 11-year-old explained that all the children on session were playing a game about crossing to the UK.



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“Children are always drawing pictures of boats and crossing attempts, it shows how much it is on their minds.

One 13-year-old told us that doing a Rubik's cube was almost as hard as crossing to the UK - it is the children's reference point for everything in Calais.”

- Connie Brophy, Welfare Coordinator, Project Play

### 4.2.b. Repeated Attempts and Long Waits

In 2024, the children we worked with spent more time on the border than in previous years. Whilst in 2023, children were present on the border for an average of 2.5 weeks, in 2024 this increased to 3.7 weeks. Some children and families were stuck for much longer than this - we worked with one family for 40 weeks. This is largely due to the increased securitisation of the border as discussed earlier in the report, which means crossing attempts are more likely to fail either due to interception by the authorities or overcrowded boats.



Children frequently spoke of being **stuck on the border for extended periods of time** while waiting to cross, and **embarking on frequent crossing attempts**. For example:

In June 2024, an 11-year-old told us her friend, aged 13, had tried over 60 times, and that she felt sorry for her “in her soul”.

In November 2024, a 3-year-old told us that he’d tried to cross 15 times.

In December 2024, one 12-year-old told us she had tried to cross 12 times and knew of others who had tried at least 20 times.

Children often asked us what the longest anyone had been in northern France was. The uncertainty of not knowing if they will be able to cross, or whether police, intermediaries or weather conditions will prevent yet another attempt, clearly induces anxiety and instability in children.

The impact of crossing on children’s physical and psychological wellbeing is often exacerbated the longer children are present in northern France, and the more they experience failed crossing attempts. For children present over many weeks we regularly see a decline in their mood and increased emotional distress and dysregulation. Longer stays also meant more crossing attempts, with each crossing attempt providing its own difficult experiences compounding the negative impact on children’s physical and psychological health.

In August, a 13-year-old described how their family, including siblings aged 6 and 3, were attacked by police during a crossing attempt and so were prevented from crossing. This is one of many examples where the UK and French government’s strategy of securitisation directly prevented a crossing, exactly as they intended.

**Yet the cost was not only direct violence against children and adults, but the extension of this family’s stay in northern France, meaning continuing to live in unstable and unsanitary living conditions, and with no certainty of when or even whether they would eventually manage to cross.**

### 4.2.c. Separation and Fear of Separation



Sometimes the children we worked with **talked about being separated from family members** who had managed to cross to the UK, including:

In July 2024, the mother of a 6-year-old said his father was already in the UK, and that they hoped to cross to rejoin him soon.

In August 2024, a 9-year-old and a 6-year-old told us their father was in the UK, and that he would have to come and get them, otherwise only their mother would be able to get to the UK.

In September 2024, one 15-year-old girl told us her older brother had crossed successfully 3 weeks previously, and that she hoped to join him.

In October, a mother and her 7-year-old child told us they thought the father of the family, and the 8- and 6-year-old siblings, were in the UK.

Other children worried about potentially being separated from their family during crossings.

**“On one of our sessions, two 11-year-olds told us how worried they were about drowning, and about their family getting broken up whilst attempting to cross.”**

*- Lily MacTaggart, Advocacy Coordinator, Project Play*

In both France and the UK, routes to seeking asylum through family reunification schemes are available - but they are heavily restricted, inefficient and inaccessible for many of those who need them.

Recent changes have seen a further reduction in the accessibility of these schemes, including in the revocation of the Dubs Amendment in the UK, which allowed unaccompanied children to come to the UK to claim asylum safely.



**Family reunification is protected under Article 10 of the UNCRC, whilst Article 9 specifies that children should not be separated from their parents wherever possible. As a result of the erosion of safe routes in both France and the UK, many of those attempting to cross - including unaccompanied children - are denied access to these rights and instead exposed to violence, harm and risk of death.**





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#### 4.2.d. Witnessing Death

The devastating rise in deaths on the UK-France border in 2024 meant more people witnessed and experienced fatal incidents. This was no less true for children, and impacted them profoundly.

When we worked with children soon after these incidents, we often noticed an increase in violent behaviour and expressions of fear and worry. Other children wanted to discuss deaths they had witnessed or heard about, demonstrating a need to verbally process these traumatic events.



The period between **July and October 2024** was particularly deadly on the border, and **children witnessed these deaths directly in many instances.**

In July 2024, the father of two boys aged 8 and 6 told us they were on a boat with a woman who died.

During a Project Play session in September 2024, after a shipwreck where 12 people died, one seven-year-old who witnessed it described what he had seen and asked if it had been in the news. Another family with children aged 7, 5 and 3 told us they witnessed this shipwreck.

After another deadly shipwreck in September 2024 which killed 8 people, we worked with an 11-year-old who described how she knew one young man who had been killed. She explained that she knew he called his mother every day, and that now she felt sad for his mother who would be missing him. A 13-year-old at the same play session also spoke a lot about a man who died in the same shipwreck.

“Did you know that there’s lots of Kurdish people buried here who died in a boat?”

I don’t want to die on a boat.”

- J\*, 8, speaking to our team at a funeral for a baby killed during a crossing attempt.



Each of these examples show the psychological impact any fatality at the border has on children, even those who were not directly involved in the incident themselves.

This psychological harm is one the UK and French governments could avoid by offering safe access to asylum for all who need it. Yet, not only are children exposed to this harm, they receive little support to process their experiences and emotions. In an extension of the lack of support provided to survivors of failed or traumatic crossing attempts, inadequate psychological support is available either in northern France or on arrival in the UK.<sup>112</sup>

**Project Play has observed that there is no adapted psychological support available from the state in Calais or Grand Synthe for children, posing a risk to their mental wellbeing in both the short and long-term.**

Article 24 of the UNCRC specifies that children have the right to the best possible health, but by allowing the instability of waiting to make a dangerous crossing to the UK, the French and UK governments are allowing children’s mental health to suffer. This is further compounded by the lack of access to psychological support both in northern France and on arrival in the UK for children and their families.



#### URGENT POLICY RECOMMENDATION:



The UK and France should demonstrate accountability for incidents in the Channel, including improving the material and psychological support offered to failed crossing survivors.

### 4.3. Impact of Fatalities on Families

The loss of a child is agonising, and particularly so when it occurs in violent and preventable circumstances. It reverberates through the whole family, impacting parents, grandparents, siblings and friends. In 2024, we worked with a number of children who had lost siblings during crossing attempts, observing the deep and enduring impact of that grief.



One child who was killed was travelling with their mother, father and three siblings, aged 8, 10 and 14. During the crossing where they were killed, a number of other children ended up in the deep water of the canal they were attempting to depart from - a terrifying experience in the cold, dark night. In the aftermath, the siblings of the child who died were separated from their parents, who were detained for a number of hours.

In the days that followed, they spoke to us about their sibling dying. A few weeks later, one child, who was 10 years old, had a flashback to them drowning when they went to a pond to look for frogs. The same child showed signs of emotional distress for weeks after the incident, getting extremely upset and regularly dissociating.

Later in the year, we supported a family who lost their baby. Their siblings, aged 7, 8 and 9, displayed signs of emotional dysregulation and distress following the death. The siblings regularly engaged in violent play, expressing a lot of anger and extreme upset.

The family remained in limbo on the border for over six weeks after the loss of their child. In September 2024, the baby's six- and seven-year-old siblings kept saying "[baby] is dead" and "[baby] was crying", pointing at the sky and saying that they were there.



The psychological impacts of the loss of a sibling are deep and enduring. Yet for all the children who suffer such a loss on the border, very limited support is available to help them understand and process their grief. Instead, they continue to experience instability and uncertainty, with their families still in need of safety.

Indeed, without safe routes to access safety in the UK, many parents feel forced to repeat the journey that cost them a child.

**The mother of a child killed in 2024 told us that they still wanted to cross despite what had happened, saying it was the only option to find safety for her other children. No parent should ever face a decision like this.**



## 4.4. SUMMARY: THE VIOLENCE OF CROSSING ATTEMPTS

With safe routes to asylum largely inaccessible, dangerous Channel crossings are the only option for many children. In 2024, heightened violence made these journeys even more lethal. Children faced increased physical danger, trauma and death. Those who survived carried lasting psychological harm; those who lost siblings were denied space to grieve. Every death at the border is preventable. There is an urgent need to end violent deterrence policies and prioritise safety, dignity and human rights.



### Findings from Section 4:

- Irregular crossings remain the only option for many children and families. Already dangerous, these journeys became even more lethal in 2024 due to intensified, violent policing.
- Children faced increased physical harm due to:
  - Overcrowded boats caused by police interception and destruction, risking shipwreck and contributing to the deaths of at least three children from crush injuries.
  - Violent police interceptions, including the use of tear gas and knives to puncture boats.
  - More remote and risky routes being used to avoid beach interceptions, such as the canal where 7-year-old Roula drowned, 30 km inland.
  - Greater reliance on intermediaries, who were often violent - particularly toward unaccompanied children.
- Children were also at greater risk of psychological harm:
  - Many expressed fear of crossing, water and police. Crossing and life in the UK were perpetual features in children's emotional landscapes.
  - Children stayed longer at the border in 2024, averaging 3.4 weeks, facing repeated crossing attempts and traumatic experiences.
  - Distress over family separation - real or feared - was common.
  - Children frequently witnessed deaths during crossing attempts. Bereaved siblings showed particular signs of psychological harm.
- This physical and psychological harm was compounded by a lack of support and protection both in northern France and on arrival in the UK.

The policies and practices documented in this section contravene the UK and France's international legal obligations, including under:



#### The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child:

- A. 6:** Right to life, survival and development
- A. 9:** Protection against separation from parents
- A.10:** Right to family reunification
- A.19:** Protection from violence
- A.20:** Special protection for children without family
- A.22:** Special protection for refugee children
- A.24:** Right to physical and psychological healthcare
- A.39:** Support for children recovering from trauma

#### The 1951 Refugee Convention

Right to seek asylum without penalty for irregular entry

To prevent further harm and fatalities, we recommend that the UK and France:



#### Urgently:

- **Demonstrate accountability** for Channel crossings, improving the **material and psychological support** offered to survivors.

#### In the short-term:

- **End all forms of violence on the border.** France must cease all violent operations, and the UK to halt funding for them.

## Section 5:

# CREATING CHANGE ON THE UK-FRANCE BORDER



## 5.1. CONCLUSION

This report has found that 2024 was a violent and dangerous year for children on the move in northern France. Against a backdrop of years of people on the move being blocked at the UK France border and recent increases in hostile migration policies across Europe, the UK and French governments collaborate to fund surveillance and police operations at the border - putting children at risk. Simultaneously, a lack of safe and accessible routes to seeking asylum in the UK, France and other parts of Europe meant that many children were left with no choice but to attempt dangerous and traumatic crossings to the UK.

While they waited to do so, they were subject to significant violence in informal living sites along the coastline in northern France. Police operations risked children's physical and psychological well-being, and many lived in constant fear of surveillance and future violence.

In 2024, crossings were more dangerous than ever before - reflected in the highest death toll ever recorded. This was due to policy choices by both France and the UK, which saw the expansion of violent securitisation actions, coupled with a lack of commitment to genuine life-saving operations. Children were subjected to violence whilst trying to cross, and were left cold and wet after traumatic failed attempts. Dichotomic feelings of fear and hope towards the journey to the UK proved a psychologically taxing combination for children, leading to emotional dysregulation and constant instability. The increased number of fatal incidents meant that more children witnessed deaths or faced bereavements, further endangering their psychological well-being in both the short and long-term.

The governments of France and the UK have actively pursued the policies which cause the violence detailed in this report. Despite their alleged commitments to human rights, including under the UNCRC, 1951 Refugee Convention and domestic legal frameworks, both states have increased the funding given to the same 'securitisation' actions which contravene human rights, including for children.

We call on both governments to accept responsibility for the role their decisions have played in creating this situation, and to demonstrate accountability by ending violence and preventing future deaths. Policy changes are needed, including immediate action to prevent further loss of life, short-term reforms to end systemic violence, and long-term shifts from policies of hostility to those which prioritise human rights.

## 5.2. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

URGENT

To prevent further loss of life in the Channel, the governments of the UK and France should urgently:

### ✓ DEMONSTRATE CROSS-BORDER ACCOUNTABILITY FOR CHANNEL CROSSINGS

- We recommend that the UK and French governments **commit to life saving operations with a genuine focus on preserving life over integrating surveillance work, including:**
  - A joint plan for life saving operations, informed by international human rights law and carried out by appropriate emergency services, not the police.
  - Increased funding for life saving operations from both governments, including transparent accountability and reporting mechanisms.
  - Life saving operations made a priority of the Calais Group in 2025.
- We recommend that the UK and French governments **publish regular data on people who have died whilst trying to cross the Channel - including age, sex and nationality.**
  - The UK government should accept Nadia Whittome's amendment to the 2025 Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill, calling for the publication of this data.
- We recommend that the governments of France and the UK **improve the support offered to survivors of shipwrecks and failed crossings on both sides of the Channel. This should include:**
  - Providing shelter, food, drink and appropriate first response.
  - Offering adapted psychological support.
  - Ending violent treatment of survivors including arrest and interrogation.
  - Creating adapted support and funding for bereaved families, including for funerals and the expatriation of the bodies of those who have died.

These changes are necessary to protect Article 6 UNCRC, the right of every child to life, survival and development; Article 24, the right to the best possible physical and mental health; and Article 39, the right to adapted support in trauma-recovery.



### ✓ END THE CRIMINALISATION OF PEOPLE ON THE MOVE

- We recommend that the France and the UK **retract legislation which criminalises those travelling irregularly, including boat 'captains'.** Such policies disproportionately affect unaccompanied children. This should include:
  - The UK government revoking the Nationality and Borders Bill and Illegal Migration Act, ending the crime of facilitation and the detention of children in adult prisons.
  - The French government revoking damaging provisions in 2023 + 2024 immigration legislation, and ending the criminalisation of irregular travel, including 'captains'.

These changes are necessary to fulfil Article 37 UNCRC, which states that children should be arrested, detained or imprisoned only as a last resort, and must not be imprisoned with adults.





To end systemic violence against people on the move, including children, and the erosion of respect for human rights, the UK and France must:

## END JOINT POLICIES OF VIOLENCE

- We recommend an **end to all forms of state violence against people on the move**. This includes, but is not limited to:
  - Police interceptions of crossing attempts, often involving the use of tear gas and weaponry, to which children are particularly at risk.
  - Police evictions of living sites, operations which have been found to constitute degrading treatment and leave unaccompanied children particularly vulnerable.
  - The surveillance of people on the move, including through intimidating police presence and the use of technology such as drones, helicopters and cameras.
- Achieving this requires action from both the UK and France:
  - We recommend that the **French government cease all violent operations and revoke the 'Zero Point of Fixation' policy**.
  - We recommend that the **UK withdraw funding for all such operations and stop negotiating for the French government to securitise the border**.

These changes are necessary to ensure children can access their rights under the UNCRC, including Article 16, the right to privacy; Article 19, the right to protection from violence; and Article 27, the right to an adequate standard of living.



## ENSURE SAFE, ACCESSIBLE ROUTES TO ASYLUM FOR ALL WHO NEED THEM

- This would end the violence children experience, both as they live in limbo in northern France and during attempts to cross the Channel.
  - We recommend that **the UK government create genuinely accessible and adapted safe routes to seeking asylum in the UK for all who need them**. This could include:
    - Expanding existing routes - such as widening the scope of family reunion schemes, particularly for unaccompanied children.
    - The ability to apply for asylum outside of the UK - within countries of origin and others. This must not, however, be weaponised to create third country processing in contravention of the 1951 Refugee Convention.
  - We recommend that **the French government create adapted asylum services and information around how to claim asylum in France for those in Calais and Dunkirk**.
    - The French government should make sure everyone makes an informed decision about whether or not to claim asylum in France. This also includes creating an office within Calais for processing asylum claims.

These changes are necessary to ensure children can access their rights to seek asylum, without penalisation for irregular travel, under the 1951 Refugee Convention.



Creating enduring change requires a shift from policies rooted in hostility to those which prioritise human rights. To achieve this, we urge the UK and France to:

## CREATE GENUINE POLICIES OF WELCOME

- Both the UK and France currently have lengthy asylum processes which leave people in limbo. **We recommend that both governments take action to adapt asylum services to provide genuine welcome to anyone who needs it.**
  - In the UK, required reform includes:<sup>113</sup>
    - Improving support for asylum seekers and granting the right to work.<sup>114</sup>
    - Ending practices of decision making aimed at minimising positive decisions, which lead to disproportionate successful appeals and prolong stress and insecurity.<sup>115</sup>
    - Abolish harmful age assessments and prioritise children's best interests.<sup>116</sup>
    - Confront the structural racism facing those within the asylum system.<sup>117</sup>
  - In France, required reform includes:<sup>118</sup>
    - Expanding services and entitlements available to asylum seekers to support their well-being and participation.

These changes are necessary to ensure children can access their rights to asylum under the 1951 Refugee Convention & to the specific protections for refugee children under A.22 UNCRC.



## BECOME INTERNATIONAL LEADERS WORKING TO END HOSTILITY

- European-wide policies of hostile migration policies risk a zero-sum race to the bottom, obfuscating the success and sustainability of positive reform. **We recommend that the UK and France use their influence to change this approach and campaign for European-wide migration policies which centre human rights, including the following:**
  - We recommend that both the UK and France **end their funding for Frontex**, and campaign for its abolition.
  - We recommend that both the UK and France work as member states of the Council of Europe to **reaffirm Europe's commitment to international human rights law**.
  - We recommend that France works as a member state of the European Union to campaign for a reversal in the bloc's increasingly hostile trajectory, including **reform of the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum**.

These steps are essential for the rights of children on the move across Europe to be respected, protected and fulfilled. The prevalence of migration policies which fail to ensure children can access safety and security hampers their meaningful enjoyment of each of their rights - which are indivisible and interdependent.



*Afterword:*

# CREATING CHANGE IN BORDER SPACES: A GLOBAL ISSUE



The UK-France border is one of many connections in a global web of oppression which enables freedom of movement for some - primarily from the Global North - while violently maintaining borders for many others. People leave their homes for many reasons, and we believe that anyone who wishes to should have the right to travel and live wherever they choose.

For many people in the Global South, leaving home is often not about discovering somewhere new, but about necessity. War, climate breakdown, repressive governments and extreme poverty have their roots in the global injustice that has flourished since the expansion of imperialism and the rise of globalised capitalism. The Global North must take responsibility for this current reality and adopt an approach that genuinely addresses the root causes of displacement - led by the Global South and affected communities.

Instead, the Global North continues to engage in ineffective aid programmes, while upholding border regimes which exclude those from the Global South who are moving to escape the problems caused by these very global injustices.<sup>118</sup> These border systems require vast infrastructure, investment and effort to maintain - there is nothing natural or inevitable about them. As relatively recent constructions shaped by post-colonial power dynamics, they are expressions of global racism - picking and choosing those who are able to enter the Global North and forcing others into dangerous, often deadly, journeys in search of protection.

Surveillance of bodies and behaviours is integral to these border systems - practices which construe people of colour as inherently 'dangerous', reinforcing the systemic violence and discrimination they face. The digitisation of border spaces, as we have touched upon in this report, is accelerating the deployment of unregulated and insidious surveillance technologies. People travelling irregularly are frequently used as test subjects for experimental tools, further entrenching the violence, discrimination and injustice of border systems.

## **We believe these systems must be dismantled.**

Every human being should be free and able to choose where they live. Global justice cannot be achieved without fundamentally shifting where power lies - countries from the Global North cannot continue to wield economic and political control over the rest of the world.

In the short-term, we call on politicians to enact the concrete policy changes set out in this report, which would bring urgently needed improvements in the situation at the UK-France border. These shifts are a first step towards a world free from the violence of borders.



## ENDNOTES

All links accessed in June 2025.

### For deaths / shipwrecks / incidents:

IOM Missing Migrants Project, accessible at - <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/data>  
 Les Jours "Les tués de Calais", accessible at - <https://lesjours.fr/obsessions/calais-migrants-morts/>.  
 Calais Migrant Solidarity "List of Deaths at the Border", accessible at - <https://calaismigrantsolidarity.wordpress.com/deaths-at-the-calais-border/>

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2 - EU Migration Integration Hub. Accessible - [https://migrant-integration.ec.europa.eu/library-document/racism-and-discrimination-context-migration-europe\\_en](https://migrant-integration.ec.europa.eu/library-document/racism-and-discrimination-context-migration-europe_en)

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4, 5 - Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (adopted 28 July 1951, entered into force 22 April 1954) 189 UNTS 137, as amended by the Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees (adopted 31 January 1967, entered into force 4 October 1967). Access an overview from UNHCR at - <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/about-unhcr/overview/1951-refugee-convention>

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8 - UNHCR, "Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2024", June 2025. Accessed - <https://www.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/2025-06/global-trends-report-2024.pdf>

9 - Home Office, Irr\_D01: Detected attempts to enter the UK irregularly by method of entry, nationality, region, sex and age group (Immigration System Statistics, 2024). Accessed - <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/immigration-system-statistics-data-tables#irregular-migration>

10 - Refugee Action, "Asylum in the UK", June 2024. Accessed - <https://www.refugee-action.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Asylum-In-The-UK-A-Front-Line-For-Racial-Justice-Briefing.pdf>

11 - Reasons for moving are individual to each person. UNHCR's Global Trends report discusses some particular case studies, as well as considering the situation in particular countries where many face displacement - <https://www.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/2025-06/global-trends-report-2024.pdf>

12 - Centre de Réflexion sur l'Action et les Savoirs Humanitaires (Médecins Sans Frontières, MSF), "Sheltering, hosting or receiving refugees", May 2017. Accessed - <https://msf-crash.org/en/publications/camps-refugees-idps/sheltering-hosting-or-receiving-refugees-unresolved-ambiguities-la>

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15 - UN Human Rights Council, "Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review, 54th session, France", October 2023. Accessed - <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/54/5>

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- 25 - A.22 UNCRC provides additional support for children who are refugees or in situations of displacement. CRIN provides a brief overview of this article: <https://archive.crin.org/en/home/rights/convention/articles/article-22-refugee-children.html>
- 26 - Khan v France (Application no 12267/16) European Court of Human Rights [29th May 2019]. Accessed - <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng/?i=001-191587>
- 27 - Unpublished document written by a group of organisations including ECPAT France, Gisti, Medecins du Monde, Medecins Sans Frontieres, Safe Passage International France and Utopia 56, submitted to the French government and the Council of Europe. You can read the French government's response here - <https://rm.coe.int/0900001680b3590b>
- 28 - As noted, compiling an accurate picture of those killed on the UK-France border is challenging. To compile this number, we used sources from Les Jours, Calais Migrant Solidarity and the IOM Missing Migrant Project - links to these are available at the top of this section. We note that the IOM revised their number of children killed in 2024 from 14 to 8, likely as a result of the change in how CMS reported the deaths of the six children on the 3rd September. Having worked with a number of these children, we know that they were, in fact, children - as such, we have used the initial number and sought clarification from partners at CMS for verification, although this was not obtained pre-publication. Coupled with the fact that deaths are likely underreported (see the Note on Statistics) we are confident that this statistic is a close reflection of the number of children killed in 2024.
- 29 - See, for e.g., Les Jours - link above.
- 30, 31 - Analysis of our own data alongside UK Home Office data, Irr\_D02 and Irr\_D02 (Immigration System Statistics, 2024). Accessed - <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/immigration-system-statistics-data-tables#irregular-migration>
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- 35 - Calais Migrant Solidarity and Les Jours - see links above
- 36 - The Refugee Council, "Truth About Channel Crossings", March 2023. Accessed - <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/stay-informed/statistics-and-research/the-truth-about-channel-crossings-and-the-impact-of-the-illegal-migration-act/>
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- 39 - Free Movement, "What safe and legal routes are available for refugees to come to the United Kingdom?", June 2025. Accessed - <https://freemovement.org.uk/what-safe-and-legal-routes-are-available-for-refugees-to-come-to-the-united-kingdom/>
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## APPENDIX A: The Power of Language

In this report, we chose language which challenges narratives of division and dehumanisation. Here, we explain some of the terms chosen in more depth. For more on the importance of language, we recommend the work of Migrant Rights Network and Mixed Migration Centre.

### “People on the move”/“children on the move”

The media often uses terms such as migrant, refugee or asylum seeker to refer to people blocked at the border in northern France, including those seeking to cross to the UK. However, the terms refugee and asylum seeker have specific legal definitions, and we cannot assume that everyone who finds themselves in this situation meets these criteria.

The term “migrant”, although accurate in meaning, is often used to dehumanise people in the media. The terms “people on the move” and “children on the move” are our preferred choices to refer to the people and children that we work with since it is person first, foregrounding the humanity of each individual. It also reminds us not to assume the reasons for which people are in northern France - we know they are “on the move” and nothing more.



### “Unaccompanied children”

Often, children travelling without their families are referred to as “unaccompanied minors”. However, here we refer to them as “unaccompanied children”. Anyone under the age of 18 is legally a child, entitled to specific rights enshrined in the UNCRC. Using “children” instead of “minors” avoids their adultification and emphasises their entitlement to the same rights as any other child.

### “Intermediaries”

Often individuals or networks who facilitate irregular migration are referred to as “smugglers” or “smuggling gangs”. This has been used by successive governments as a justification to pursue aggressively hostile policies against migration, by blaming those who facilitate irregular passage for the risks of crossing. These terms also draw on racialised stigma of brown and black people, and enable the criminalisation of individuals crossing who are labelled “captains” of boats and therefore held responsible for accidents and incidents on board. Therefore, we avoid using this term and use the term “intermediaries”.



### “Safe (and accessible) routes”

When describing ways by which people might travel to the UK, one category is often called “safe routes”, designating routes codified under government policy which mean people don’t have to use irregular ways of crossing. These are often referred to as “safe and legal routes”, including by the UK government, implying that the unsafe routes people are using to cross are illegal.

This echoes UK government rhetoric which criminalises both Channel crossings and the people making these journeys - rhetoric which has been transformed into legislation. However, this undermines international law as, under the 1951 UN Refugee Convention, the UK cannot impose penalties on those who enter without permission for the purposes of seeking asylum (Article 31). Therefore we use the term “safe routes” or “safe and accessible routes”, but not the term “safe and legal routes”.

### “Irregular” (Migration/ Routes)

We use the term “irregular” to refer to migration or routes taken to cross borders which are not approved by governments. As explained above, this migration is not illegal under international law - referring to such journeys as “irregular” reflects the fact that they are outside formal systems created by states, and acknowledging the specific risks and challenges associated as a result.



## APPENDIX B: Further Reading and Useful Resources

### Memorials to those who have lost their lives at the UK-France Border

Le Mémorial de Calais - Les Jours  
<https://apps.lesjours.fr/morts-calais/>

Cette frontière tue - Calais Migrant Solidarity  
<https://calaismigrantsolidarity.wordpress.com/deaths-at-the-calais-border/cette-frontiere-tue/>

### Northern France context

Evictions: Practices that violate children's rights on the Franco-British Border - Project Play, 2020 (English and French)  
[https://www.project-play.org/\\_files/ugd/6fd156\\_4865186c5f264ad6b5c139962958df6c.pdf](https://www.project-play.org/_files/ugd/6fd156_4865186c5f264ad6b5c139962958df6c.pdf)  
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Overviews of the barriers to education facing children in northern France - Project Play, 2020 (English and French)  
[https://www.project-play.org/\\_files/ugd/6fd156\\_387db228935b4922847617e1addd870c.pdf](https://www.project-play.org/_files/ugd/6fd156_387db228935b4922847617e1addd870c.pdf)  
<http://project-play.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Project-Play-Des-Barrieres-A-LEducation.pdf>

Barriers to accessing child protection in France - Project Play, 2021 (English and French)  
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[https://www.project-play.org/\\_files/ugd/6fd156\\_a73623db0ab5455a889d49f855a84862.pdf](https://www.project-play.org/_files/ugd/6fd156_a73623db0ab5455a889d49f855a84862.pdf)

The history of the jungle in Calais - Collective Aid, 2024 (English)  
<https://www.collectiveaidngo.org/blog/2024/6/17/the-history-of-the-jungle-in-calais-part-one>

30 ans de fabrique politique de la dissuasion - Plateforme Soutien Migrants, 2022 (French and English)  
<https://www.lacimade.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/02-01a-PSM-Rapport-30ans-V3.pdf>  
<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/63f61b76b5add8045f1294fa/t/66c228e33e72cb03d78b0745/1724000496188/FINAL+ENG+PSM-Rapport-30ans.pdf>

On the border - Plateforme Soutien Migrants, 2022 (French and English)  
<https://psmigrants.org/documents/176/02-03a-PSM-Rapport-OnTheBorder-V3-1.pdf>  
[https://static1.squarespace.com/static/63f61b76b5add8045f1294fa/t/66c2292445f9cb084da06589/1724000580850/FINAL+ENG+On\\_The\\_Border.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/63f61b76b5add8045f1294fa/t/66c2292445f9cb084da06589/1724000580850/FINAL+ENG+On_The_Border.pdf)

5 years on: an analysis of the past and present situation at the UK-France border, five years after the peak of the Calais 'Jungle' camp - Refugee Rights Europe, 2021 (English and French)  
[https://refugee-rights.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/RRE\\_FiveYearsOn.pdf](https://refugee-rights.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/RRE_FiveYearsOn.pdf)  
[https://refugee-rights.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/RRE\\_CinqAnsPlusTard.pdf](https://refugee-rights.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/RRE_CinqAnsPlusTard.pdf)

Rapport statistique Calais 2024 - UNHCR France, 2024 (French)  
<https://www.unhcr.org/fr-fr/media/rapport-statistique-calais-2024>

<<C'est normal qu'ils nous traitent comme ça >> - Medecins Sans Frontieres, 2024 (French)  
<https://www.msf.fr/actualites/mineurs-non-accompagnes-a-calais-des-violences-repetees-et-banalisees>

### Risk posed by increased surveillance

The deadly consequences of the new deal to 'Stop the Boats' - Alarmphone, 2024 (English)  
[https://alarmphone.org/en/2024/01/28/the-deadly-consequences-of-the-new-deal-to-stop-the-boats/?post\\_type\\_release\\_type=post](https://alarmphone.org/en/2024/01/28/the-deadly-consequences-of-the-new-deal-to-stop-the-boats/?post_type_release_type=post)

Frontex flights and fatalities in the Channel - Statewatch, 2024 (English)  
<https://www.statewatch.org/news/2024/september/frontex-flights-and-fatalities-in-the-channel/>

Six people die in the Channel in one week - Alarmphone, 2024 (English)  
[https://alarmphone.org/en/2024/07/24/six-people-die-in-the-channel-in-one-week/?post\\_type\\_release\\_type=post](https://alarmphone.org/en/2024/07/24/six-people-die-in-the-channel-in-one-week/?post_type_release_type=post)



Written evidence on the use of the UK military in the Channel - Drone Watch UK, 2022 (English)  
<https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/43101/pdf/>

### Police violence

Annual reports - Human Rights Observers (English and French)  
<https://humanrightsobservers.org/fr/reports/>

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# “We Want to be Safe”:

The impact of violence against children  
on the UK-France border in 2024

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